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A giant among thieves...

There's been a lot of discussion lately about Demon's Souls. Play writers Nick Des Barres and Heather Campbell think it's great. I've heard "one of the best games I've played" punctuate their praise. They appreciate its difficulty curve. Game designer Brandon Justice does not, and he makes some very interesting points, beginning on page 12.

It's a good thing to see games getting such heated debate these days. The rising complexities of the virtual worlds we play in are creating an awkward growing-pains stage. We're starting to see real change and growth, beyond the simple debate of weapons balance and level progression and equipment management. Games like Uncharted 2 and Modern Warfare 2 are introducing the kind of spectacle we normally associate with the movies.

And there are plenty of you out there who can't stand that. You want to play Demon's Souls, get your asses kick and come back for more; maybe you even forgive it of its faults because it's so unflinchingly, obsessively Hardcore. Plenty of you just can't take the AAA approach that much at all anymore, looking forward to the subtler, more classically spun qualities of the indie space. And the iPhone is stealing the show in ways no one wants to really admit. I can't begin to tell you how many people bring up Peggle these days when they talk about their favorite experiences this year. I am one of them. There are tons more games from Apple's progressive little phone that any good designer should study.

What all these games and more possess are a specific difficulty level. The challenge of any game unspools in various ways—understanding systems, judging space and AI, dealing with external forces that feed off risk and reward. Often time we equate challenge with death, and this, I believe, is one of the most archaic forms of game design that needs particular examination.

Death is the penultimate failure in life. We want to avoid it at all costs; it makes sense that this notion, boiled down to its essence, drives a good deal of game design philosophy. Death has classically been the form of punishment to our gameplay mistakes. It'd be fun to see a redirected focus on new ideas that divorce themselves completely from the idea of death. Get away from the idea of the section reset being the dominant means for gameplay pleasure. Perhaps to do that we need to get away from the idea that a fun game requires killing things and destroying external obstacles with brute force. Perhaps this is simply an impossibility. I'd imagine it is in the short term.

All this talk of death and wouldn't you know it: it's almost time for the joys of Christmas! I've been a good boy this year, avoiding smashing bugs on the sidewalk and killing too many brain cells at the pub talking about games into the wee hours of the night. I'm hoping Santa decides to air drop a giant new HD television to replace my ancient rear-projection LCD that just died after 6 years of fine service. Modern televisions are falling in price so precipitously, even Nintendo is hinting they'll be getting their stalling Wii up to snuff for the HD generation sooner than we might think. You just can't blow crap up or slice things in half or jump to your death and have it really mean anything unless it's in pristine high definition—or so the argument tends to go these days.

My suggestion for the holidays is to go experience Modern Warfare 2—the inevitable record-breaking seller that deserves its accolades...and criticisms. Funny how one of the most genuinely powerful scenes I've experienced in a game involved taking part in massacring an airport full of innocent bystanders. Games have the ability to show us many things, good or bad, right or wrong, and for all my questions about death, I'm grateful Infinity Ward chose to take me here.

Debate amongst yourselves what you ultimately want from your video games this season while stuffing your faces—happy holidays!

~Brady Fiechter

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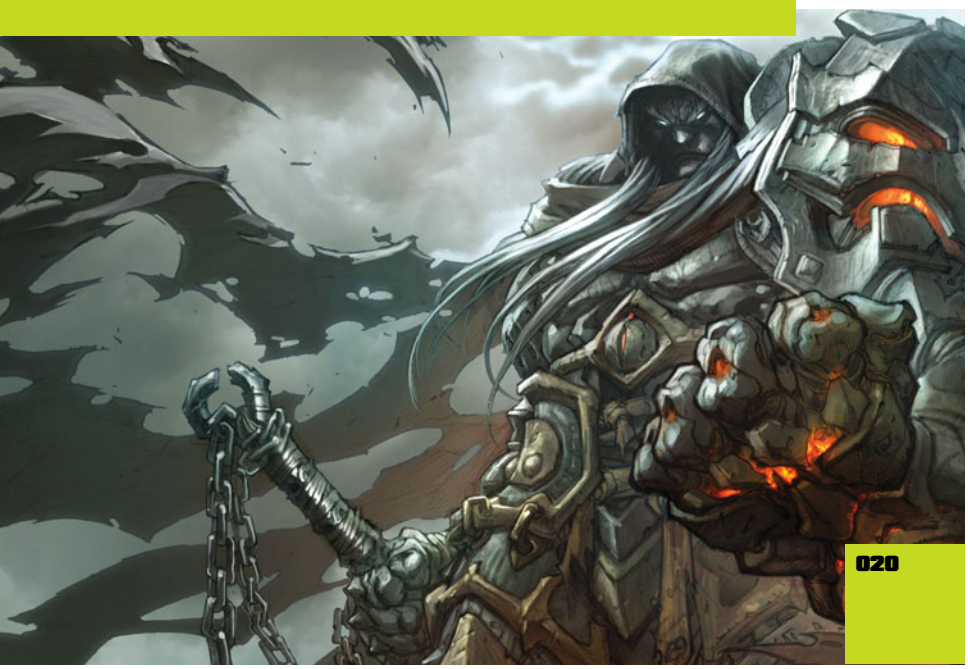


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December 2009

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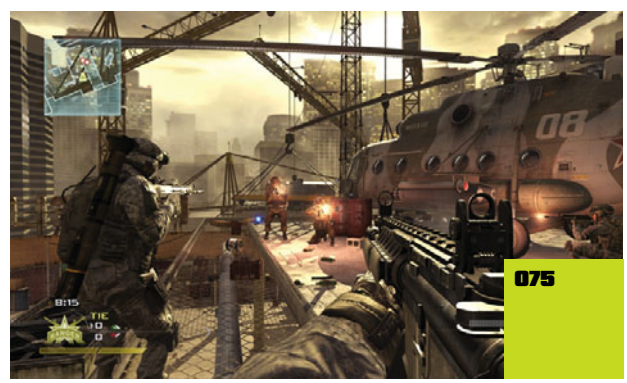
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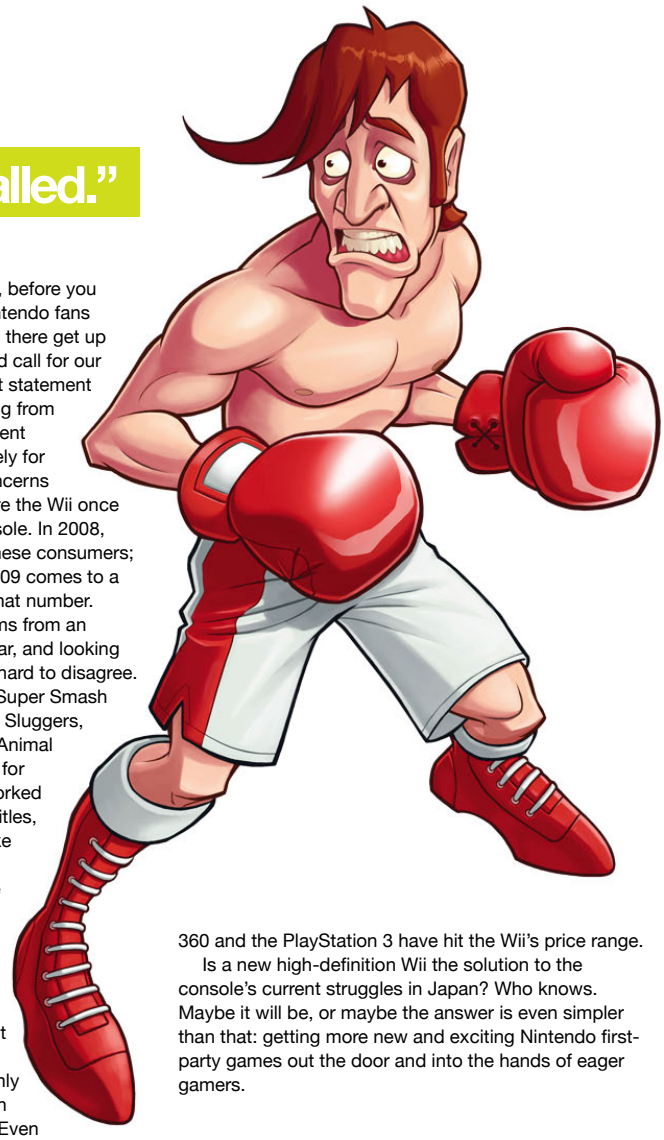
"The Wii has stalled."



Now, before you Nintendo fans out there get up in arms and call for our heads, that statement isn't coming from us; it comes from Nintendo's own President and CEO, Satoru Iwata. And, unfortunately for Nintendo, he's right, at least where it concerns Nintendo's home country of Japan, where the Wii once looked poised to become the go-to console. In 2008, almost 3 million units were sold to Japanese consumers; if current sales trends continue, when 2009 comes to a close, they'll be lucky to have sold half that number.

The problem, according to Iwata, stems from an admittedly weak software line-up this year, and looking at a list of Nintendo-published titles, it's hard to disagree. While 2008 saw major releases such as Super Smash Bros. Brawl, Mario Kart Wii, Mario Super Sluggers, Wario Land: The Shake Dimension, and Animal Crossing: City Folk, Nintendo's offerings for 2009 so far has consisted mostly of reworked GameCube ports and upgraded casual titles, with only a few "hardcore" exceptions like Punch-Out!! or Another Code: R.

So how does Nintendo plan to handle the cooling of excitement for the Wii in the Land of the Rising Sun? While they aren't exactly ready to let slip their exact plans, the whispers of a WiiHD possibly hitting in 2010 are growing louder and louder. In the homebrew community, a lot of work has been done on software that proves that current Wii games can not only be re-rendered in HD resolutions, but can look absolutely beautiful in the process. Even if Nintendo isn't quite as ambitious as that, providing a Wii revision better suited to go head-to-head with the competition will be crucial for Nintendo now that the Xbox 360 and the PlayStation 3 have hit the Wii's price range.



Is a new high-definition Wii the solution to the console's current struggles in Japan? Who knows. Maybe it will be, or maybe the answer is even simpler than that: getting more new and exciting Nintendo first-party games out the door and into the hands of eager gamers.

Is a new high-definition Wii the solution to the console's current struggles in Japan?



The upcoming black Wii and accessories should move a few more units.

playback

letters@playmagazine.com

"Bordervania: Ditty of the Dust" is my own name for my new favorite game.

Whenever I find myself actually playing a game from start to finish, I try to figure out what was the reason it kept me though to the end. Of the last few console generations, there have only been a select few games that I've actually endured to completion and Gearbox's Borderlands is the latest to have my undivided attention.

As I began thinking of the winning qualities of this surprising jewel of a game, I noticed a striking similarity between Borderlands and Castlevania: Symphony of the Night. Sure; the presentation is a few generations apart, and game design has evolved considerably since 1998; but there is one common thread they share. And what a mighty thread it is.

After trekking through untold lengths of unfamiliar territory, I come face to face with an enemy that I have not yet vanquished. Brandishing my favorite instrument of deletion, I begin my assault only to see little tiny amounts of "hit points" being whittled away with my (once-mighty) weapon of choice. Courage quickly turns to panic and I desperately search through my current trove of equipment for something that could possibly make a dent. I proceed to stick-and-move, duck-and-dodge, jump, run, fire, backpedal, and drink all the heath potions I have while sutaining unbelievable chunks of damage every time this unholy abomination lands a hit on my puny avatar. Just when I'm ready to see the impending death of my valiant attempt, the goliath falls in a heap as my health bar blinks madly in it's single digit reserve. Then something amazing happens. A shiny new thing rendered in beautiful color combinations lie shimmering at the place where fear and dread once stood. The flood of gleeful anticipation to wield this new weapon or item is the reward I was looking for.

I absolutely love Borderlands and will keep playing it beyond completion, but I dare say that it's not as new or different as 2K would have us believe.

As different as they look on the surface, great games of different generations and technology share common denominators and game developers would do well to note those intangible things that make us "finish the game."

Surely,I read way too much into things, but I really dig Play's perspective.

Michael R. 'Claw'



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Gaming Gone By
File #010

1993

words Eric L. Patterson

First-Person Shooters Get Doomed

It's hard to look at today's gaming market and think of a time when the first-person shooter genre didn't exist, as store shelves are stocked with an endless amount of high-profile FPS productions from nearly every major game publisher. That wasn't the case sixteen years ago, however, when on December 10th, 1993, id Software released their new MS-DOS title Doom. In fact, when Doom hit, the words "first-person shooter" didn't even exist as a term used to define a category of gaming. There were, of course, games previous to Doom that fit that category–id's own Wolfenstein 3D, for one–but it was Doom that would cement the popularity of the genre. (So much so, in fact, that for a while "Doom clone" was the commonly-used way to describe the FPS titles that followed.)

Designed by John Romero, and running on a new 3D engine put together by John Carmack (both Johns would go on to be stars in the gaming world thanks to their efforts), Doom made numerous strides to push gaming forward, from its (for the time) amazingly detailed portrayals of violence, a previously-unseen level of graphical sophistication (thanks to Carmack's work), an addictive and extensive multiplayer experience, and the ability for fans of the game to modify and create all new stages and game types thanks to "WAD" files.

The final result was a game that was a smashing success among critics and gamers alike, and a title that forever changed the world of video games. Just as Street Fighter II legitimized fighting games, Doom did the same for what would become first-person shooter genre. Of course, along with this also came controversy. Doom's high levels of violence and demonic themes were seen as unacceptable by various parent and activist organizations, with some even believing the game could be considered a "mass murder simulator." Playing Doom, it was argued, could influence people to become violent in real life, and was pointed to as a scapegoat for the tragic events that occurred at Columbine High.

I'll Stab You and Chop Her Head Off

James Callaghan of Yorkshire, England, now 18, has been sentenced to an indefinite stay at a high-security mental institution after terrorizing his neighborhood during a drunken rampage that followed a FIFA 2008 losing streak.

At only 6 years of age Callaghan threatened to kill his mother. Diagnosed with schizophrenia only after his arrest, he was often plagued by voices telling him to kill and visions of a man with horns. Then, shortly after Christmas last year, he lost three rounds of FIFA 2008 to his brother and a friend. Enraged, he downed nearly an entire bottle of vodka, armed himself with an axe and long-bladed knife, then set out on a rampage through his neighborhood.

Two young girls eating on a park bench were interrupted by Callaghan, who slammed the axe between them and said, "I'm going to stab you and chop her head off." The girls ran. Callaghan pursued another man and caught up with him when he tripped and fell; though Callaghan straddled the man and hit him once in the head with his axe, the man managed to escape. Callaghan then waved his axe at a bicyclist, then forced his way into the home of 65-year-old Irene Robertson. He brutally killed her with six axe blows to the head and multiple stab wounds. He wrote a short apology note on a wall mirror in lipstick ("mom I'm sorry I didn't mean to kill an old woman"), then terrorized a married couple by trying to break into their home, demanding alcohol from them. When the police arrived, he readily admitted his guilt.

The Daily Mail, a British tabloid famous for its rabblerousing antics, noted that Callaghan had even played GTA4 at some point in his life (though they made no mention of the latest movies he'd seen). To an aging demographic that feels increasingly alienated from gaming's status as mainstream entertainment, *The Daily Mail*'s sensational use of an obvious scapegoat no doubt adds fuel to the fire of the age old debate: When a crime like this is committed, did it happen because of a lifetime of undiagnosed schizophrenia, hallucinations, alcoholism, and years of violent behavior... or was it because of the games about crime and soccer?

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Bits

Nintendo announces upgraded DSi for release next year, sporting larger 4.2 inch screen, increased battery life, another stylus packed in, and more.

Buy the creepy cool sci-fi film *District 9* on Blu-ray, get a demo for God of War III.



Game companies develop bad habit of releasing too many versions of the same game

Nintendo sells over 50 million Wii Sports, New Super Mario Bros. DS sneaks up on 20 million, Mario Kart Wii over 18 million sold

Classic Doom goes to the iPhone

Netflix comes to PS3, current subscribers get it for free

Black Wii to be released for the holidays in the UK

An angry father shoots and kills his 17-year-old son in a tussle over a lost video game

New Live interface integrates Facebook, Twitter, Zune and more

Nintendo named "World's Best Company" by Business Week

Excitebike: World Rally, a remake of Excitebike, goes to WiiWare

Sony shows off holographic technology, the gaming mind wanders

Leaked Modern Warfare 2 trailer depicting a terrorist massacre in an airport is less terrifying than the people cluelessly complaining about it

Insomniac's Mike Acton writes on his blog that "framerate is still important to us here at Insomniac, but it's not on the same pedestal it was before." He continues that "Ratchet and Clank Future: A Crack in Time will probably be Insomniac's last 60fps game."



Special Edition Season is Upon Us

Hope you've got room for an over-sized Uncharted 2 replica Phurba dagger!

It's that time of year again, when an extra $10—or $110—will score you that Special/Collectors'/Deluxe/Bonus/Cherry-on-top edition of your favorite game. And, just like previous years, crusty critics and fickle fans will no doubt condemn them as "pricey tin cases full of crap." To these buzz-killing folks I offer this: You are so missing the point! Sure, these content-crammed offerings are not for everyone (that's why standard editions are also available—see, no one's forcing you to purchase the pricier version), but for those especially passionate about a particular property, that extra art book, bonus DVD, or action figure is worth every geek-earned penny. The bottom line: One man's too-small, crappy plastic helmet, is another's must-have, proudly-displayed mini Master Chief Spartan headgear. So, you standard edition sticklers go spend all that coin you're saving on something boring; just don't rain on our parade—it might rust our collectible tin cases. Last month we checked out the season's more wallet-friendly editions, but now it's time to give the economy the finger, and spy the season's absolute best in excess.

Uncharted 2: Among Thieves Fortune Hunter Edition

Honestly, most Limited Editions are not "limited" at all. Sure, they produce a lot less of them than the standard editions, but chances are you'll still be able to score one at your local EB Games weeks after release. That's what makes this one so damn special—they only made 300 of 'em! Hell, Nathan Drake himself would have to do some serious spelunking to sniff one of these bad boys out. Of course, it'd be totally worth it, as it's packaged in an enormous box—signed by the dev team, no less—that's meant to look like an ancient tome. Inside, treasure-seeking gamers will discover a BradyGames strategy guide, full-size art book, soundtrack, bonus codes for in-game extras and, coolest of all, a replica of the title's fabled Phurba dagger with display stand. The impressive artifact is done no justice in pictures; it may be plastic, but it's enormous and carries a commendable heft. If fortune and glory chasers want a piece of this one, though, they'll have to win one (check for details on the PlayStation Blog), or swim the dangerous depths of eBay.

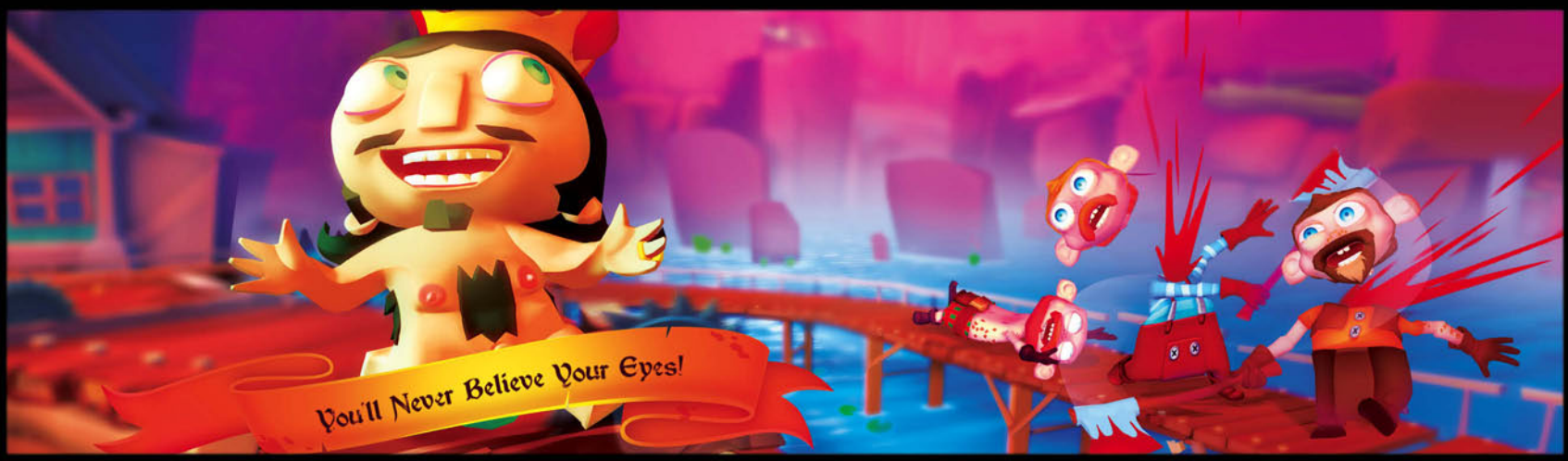
The Beatles: Rock Band Limited Edition Premium Bundle

After last year's Guitar Hero World Tour, I swore I wouldn't bring another plastic musical instrument into my living room. But then Rock Band touched my rubber soul with this Fab Four fan-pleaser. The Ludwig-branded drums with pearl finish and Beatles kick drum head, microphone and stand are all groovy, but it's that Hofner Bass controller—a detail-drenched replica of Sir Paul









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Forza Motorsport 3 Limited Collector's Edition

If you're a Forza fan, it's likely the blood of an avid collector already races through your veins—how else do you explain those 400 rides in your virtual garage? Presented in slick triptych packaging, this one offers some standard SE fare—key chain, USB Drive, 360 dashboard theme—but it's a VIP membership to the Forza Auction House and Community Storefront that should be most appealing to automotive enthusiasts. With this all-access pass comes an exclusive car pack and additional rides tuned and painted by the speed demons at Turn 10.

Assassin's Creed II Limited Edition: Master Assassin's Edition

This killer edition has lots of goodies tucked under its cloak. A bonus disc (complete with soundtrack and behind the scenes goodies), hardcover art book, and two exclusive in-game maps would be enough to make any pick-pocket's day. But it's the 8.5" Ezio action figure (sure beats the puny Altair that came with the last game) that's got me clearing a space on my bookshelf. The intricately detailed sculpt looks awesome jabbing its blades at the six eyes of my Chimera figure from last year's Resistance 2 SE!



Dragon Age Origins Collectors Edition

Loot-loving gamers will want to sacrifice a few extra gold pieces for the ultimate edition of the year's most anticipated RPG. In addition to a soundtrack and making-of documentary, this one includes an old school



cloth map—you know, like the ones real-life treasure-seeking, troll-slayers used to carry back in the day. If those extras aren't enough to line your satchel, a host of exclusive in-game items are also included to ensure that Ferelden's invading archdemon doesn't completely make you its bitch.



DJ Hero Renegade Edition

While most Special Editions often offer collectibles and other cool, but not always practical, items, DJ Hero's Renegade Edition is all about honing your scratching and spinning skills. The premium finished turntable might be all about the bling, but the hard storage case, which sprouts legs and doubles as a stand, is made to make you feel like a true mix master—see how it feels playing on your coffee table after using the Renegade stand. On top of the game-enhancing gear, this one packs in an exclusive Jay-Z and Eminem 2-CD pack.

The Call of Duty Modern Warfare 2 Prestige Edition

The Halo 3 SE that saw many a gamer trying to cram that mini Master Chief helmet onto their cats may have finally met its match. The ultimate in fanboy excess, MW2's Prestige Edition includes an art book and a code to



download the original Call of Duty. Oh yeah, and friggin' night vision goggles! Yup, if you wanna rock it like Sam Fisher, you'll need to snag the only SE that contains an actual piece of working military technology. Don't try these on your cat, though, as felines already possess superior low-light vision.

Demon's Souls Deluxe Edition

No action figures or bonus discs, here. No sir, Atlus knows exactly what gamers need—a 160-page strategy guide. It may not be glamorous, but it's a perfect companion to a game that's been heralded for its old school difficulty. From walkthroughs to detailed charts, the mini book piles the tips, hints, and strategies higher than the demon corpses. Sadly, this in-demand edition is already sold out, so better bring your soul-stealing skills to the online auction houses if you want to survive in Boletaria.



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MATURE 17+ M CONTENT RATED BY ESRB
Blood and Gore
Drug Reference
Sexual Content
Strong Language
Violence

PlayStation®Portable

PlayStation®Network

words Brandon Justice

On Swords, Sorcery and Soul-Sucking Madness

You know, the more I think about it, misconception is one of the biggest issues we face as an industry. We don't always understand why the games we make are fun. We don't always get why one FPS sells millions and a deliberate clone can't manage to break even. And even more to the point, we often fail to figure out why games that find favor with critics can't seem to crack the top 10 with consumers.

To me, it all comes down to a painful inability to be honest about where we're failing. One of the worst offenders on this front has to be the way we view gaming's most devoted fanbase, the so-called Hardcore.

Yup, say what you will about our hygiene, our mojo with the opposite sex, or our seemingly endless supply of black T-shirts, but if nothing else, we're a patient lot. I say this because the "career gamers" among us have to endure 1,000 types of torture as publishers attempt to figure out that magic mixture that will take their slightly appealing action-adventure game from a fan-favorite to a mass-market must-have.

Cameras, control schemes, character design…you name it, and chances are some monkey in a suit has altered your favorite feature to dumb it down and make it mushy for the masses. If you're new to gaming or a bit less discriminating in your gaming tastes, this is probably a good thing. But if you fall into the category of that borderline-OCD army of veteran gamers who happily count themselves among the Hardcore, few things inspire annoyance like the fear game devs have at the thought of making their games difficult.

I say this because, back in the day, the true mark of a gamer's grit was in his ability to churn through Chakan. His desire to beat down Battletoads. His flat out refusal to let The Lost Levels succeed as some strange experiment in teenage torture. But nowadays? Difficulty seems like an afterthought. Moreover, it seems like folks are so obsessed with building games people can experience, we plumb forgot that they're also made to be beaten.

Personally, I find myself growing weary of all this touchy-feely chocolate in my gaming peanut butter, and miss the days where games knew what it meant to kick my ass. As such, it was only reasonable that my inner nerd would leap for joy at the oozing of internet enthusiasm for FromSoftware's latest dungeon crawler, Demon's Souls.

I played a little King's Field back in the day, and upon hearing of its technique-heavy, heartless execution and its ability to reduce mindless mortals to piles of ineffective goo, I had to pick it up. I mean, after traipsing through Hollow 3 and Princess of Persia, I felt like it was time to roll up my sleeves and clear my calendar, so I blocked off a weekend, broke out the anti-depressants in the event of my untimely demise, and went to work; broadsword in hand.

So was it worth the hype? Well, that all depends on how you look at it.

This game is definitely a ball-buster. It gives no quarter and makes no apologies, and seems to delight in making life difficult for difficulty's sake. I've read countless interviews from the developers, and an equal number of editorials disguised as reviews that ramble on about how they hate this game, but love playing it anyways, and personally, I can't escape the feeling that they're so starved for a decent dose of difficulty that they've lost their collective minds.

I say this because there's a big difference between a demanding, relentless game with air-tight mechanics and a game that suffers from bad camera angles, a horrendously inaccurate target-locking system and an arbitrary death penalty that unnecessarily makes up for a lack of depth and game length.

Regardless of what you may read, all of Demon's Souls artistic and atmospheric successes can't overshadow the fact that it shamelessly subscribes to all of the issues noted above. What's worse, the general structure of the game is built around putting the player in situations that highlight these problems. Guys hide behind corners. They run at you in the dark. They attack you instantly when you enter an arena. They hit you from behind while perched three stories above your entry point. And if any one of them catches you by surprise, you have to go allllll the way through the level again for the right to use your ill-acquired knowledge to cheat them out of a surprise attack.

Chances are some monkey in a suit has altered your favorite feature to dumb it down and make it mushy for the masses.

And that is what we're calling fun?

Not if you ask me. It's the definition of a vicious cycle, and while the core game is admittedly enjoyable, it boggles the mind that most fans fail to recognize that Souls is less "difficult" than it is "cheap," both in how it poses a threat to your existence, and how you are empowered to respond to those threats.

Yes, you can improve your technique as a fighter. And yes, as you level up, you do learn how to avoid anal violation at the hands of clever level designers, but in the end, the whole notion of cheating as a mechanic isn't exactly a revolution in product quality. It's an homage to concepts that veteran gamers appreciate, but way the execution just misses the point.

The thing is, true difficulty isn't about wrestling with mechanics, it's about defeating an objective. It's not about being blind-sided or handicapped or structuring your game such that it takes 5-6 times longer than it should to defeat a level.

I'm sure lots of folks will disagree with that statement, but I also know they'll understand where I'm coming from. But regardless of how you feel about difficulty in gaming, you kinda can't escape the notion that the things that make Demon's Souls so great to its fans are also what make it so annoying to the majority of people that are going to play it.

Given that it's is such a beautiful, haunting game, this sort of philosophical split is a frickin' problem. And when you consider folks' love for this game, problems and all, one can't help but sigh at the way they trumpet the notion of what this game is supposed to be rather than recognize what this game is.

In the end, though, I'm just not buying it.

A difficult game should be to reward skill, not patience…or at least a healthy mixture of both, and in that sense, Souls just flops. I was promised a throwback. I was promised a challenge. What I got was more of an exercise in ignoring systematically imposed frustration. I know people see it when they play the game, but they just seemed so determined to sweep it under the rug because of all the things it gets right.

The thing is, game quality isn't about any one thing. It's not about loving an idea or an aesthetic. It's about how it all comes together, and just like any love affair, even the smallest flaw can result in disappointment.

In the end, that's what I feel when I hit the wall in Souls. It's not anger or irritation or even boredom. I just get bummed that progress requires pain. I get annoyed that no one pushed these guys to refine this concept, because I really do feel it's extremely close to greatness. And more than all that, I find myself amused that fans aren't willing to dish out the tough love the game is built on when they sum it all up.

But the truth is, games need that criticism. They crave a hard look. Just like your in-game avatars, they demand to be pushed and shaped into something greater if they'll ever get past their own short-comings. You can defend them. You can rationalize them in the fires of nostalgia, but in the end, if you're not honest, you're just enabling mediocrity which, in this humble writer's opinion, costs our hobby many more souls than implementing checkpoints and improving you targeting system. Just sayin'.

Brandon Justice practices the under-appreciated art of soul-searching each day as Design Director at Quick Hit Inc. Feel free to condemn his soul to gaming hell via e-mail at bjustice@quickhit.com. play



Art from FromSoftware's Demon's Souls

Database

NPD GROUP

DECEMBER **2009**

Top 10 VG Console/Portable SKU's September 2009

01	Halo 3 ODST	360	Microsoft	1.52M
02	Wii Sports Resort W/Wii Motion Plus	Wii	Nintendo	442.9k
03	Madden NFL 10	360	EA	289.6k
04	Mario & Luigi Bowsers Inside Story	NDS	Nintendo	258.1k
05	The Beatles: Rock Band	360	MTV Games/EA	254.0k
06	Madden NFL 10	PS3	EA	246.5k
07	Marvel Ultimate Alliance 2	360	Activision/Blizzard	236.0k
08	Batman Arkham Asylum	PS3	Square Enix Inc.	212.5k
09	Guitar Hero 5	360	Activision/Blizzard	210.8k
10	The Beatles: Rock Band	Wii	MTV Games/EA	208.6k

Hardware Units September 2009

01	Nintendo DS	524.2k
02	PlayStation 3	491.8k



03	Wii	462.8k
04	Xbox360	352.6k
05	PSP	190.4k
06	PlayStation 2	146.0k

NPD Group's U.S. Video Games Industry Sales

September 2009
Reporting Period:
8/30/09 through 10/03/09

	Sep 08	Sep 09	CHG	YTD SEPT 08	YTD SEPT 09	CHG
Video Games	$1.27B	$1.28B	1%	$11.85B	$10.36B	-13%
Video Games Hardware	$499.96M	$472.28M	-6%	$4.23B	$3.57B	-16%
Video Games Software	$617.57M	$649.32M	5%	$6.08B	$5.36B	-12%
Video Game Accessories	$153.83M	$157.33M	2%	$1.54B	$1.43B	-7%



iPhone GAMING

words Evan Shamoon

Export to... Apple iPhone

The iPhone has been the newest recipient of some rather high-quality console ports of late. The first comes from a time long, long ago (the nineties), where side-scrolling platformers ruled the day and Earthworm Jim was their king. The second is a little ditty called "Rock Band" (you may have heard of it), which has finally made its logical transition to Apple's touch-centric device. Both games lose quite a bit in the transition—in Earthworm's case the somewhat slippery virtual D-pad, and in Rock Band's case the ergonomically awkward experience of tapping small rectangles on a small screen (particularly when strumming the guitar). Still, both games are extremely well produced and fun—not to mention utterly faithful to the originals; Rock Band even allows four-player, four-instrument rocking.



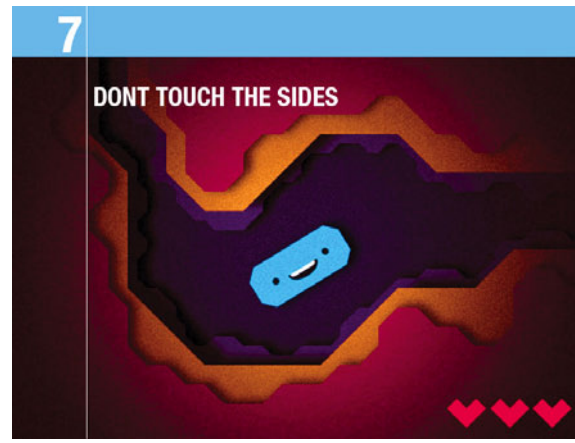


Rock out: iPhone style.









Power Pill

Independent developer Polytron, known for its impressive work on the as-yet-unreleased *Fez*, has announced it's working on an iPhone game called *Power Pill*.

The game places you in control of a super medicine as it works its way through a human body. The medicine is so strong that it can't touch the sides of the body without damaging it, and your job is to squeeze, push, and pull the pill into different shapes and sizes in order to get it to where it needs to go. The game also has users sweeping up "goop" or fighting bacteria.

Goo on Your iPhone

World of Goo made quite a splash in the indie world when it landed last year. The physics-based puzzle game featured some of the most original ideas and addictive gameplay in recent memory, and landed atop many Downloadable Game of the Year lists for 2008. With the game currently available for Mac, PC and WiiWare, developer 2D Boy has announced that *Goo* is coming to the iPhone: it's not clear whether this will be a straight port or an entirely new game, but either way, this means nothing but goo things for iPhone owners.



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gaming culture

words Evan Shamoon

Rap Games

Yes, you've seen videogame-influenced music videos before. And yes, rappers certainly love themselves some videogames. But you've never seen anything like the just-dropped video from Swedish rapper Pato Pooh (featuring Adam Tensta) for his song Follow Me, which pays tribute to the a non-stop flurry of 8- and 16-bit era games, from Mega Man to Duck Hunt to Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles. While the rap stylings are a bit derivative, it's a wild ride and impeccably produced–and if you are reading this page demands a viewing. http://patopooh.com/



Paper Mike

There are few images more iconic than Mike Tyson's 8-bit avatar from the original NES Mike Tyson's Punch-Out!!, and this fact is celebrated by Montreal designer Mathieu Conway. The handmade, screen-printed Tyson pixel busts on blue backgrounds will make a great addition to your home, office, or boxing gym. Equally awesome is crafster user Enemyairship's Mario rug, a 7' x 7' Raccoon masterpiece, hand crocheted from 3.5" squares (read: pixels).





Instructions not included.





Finally, Ice Invaders Ice Tray: Images say it all..

Indiecade

While videogames at large have their E3, the indie gaming community has been asking for its own get-together—and it has finally arrived, with the first ever IndieCade International Festival of Independent Games, which went down in Los Angeles over the first weekend of October. The four day blowout of events, exhibitions and keynotes that included more than two dozen selected independent games, as well as Katamari Damacy creator Keita Takahashi (Katamari Damacy), Will Wright (The Sims), Jenova Chen (Flower), professor Henry Jenkins, and many others. A rousing success, then, which means that there will be another one next year.





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words Eric-Jon Rössel Waugh

the playlist

those tenuous twos



Part One: Simon's Quest

Used to be, when a game was successful enough to demand a sequel, the design team would do its best to avoid repeating itself. Though I'm sure they mostly wanted to keep their job interesting, the practical effect was that if the games were different, they would both remain relevant. In an arcade, Donkey Kong Jr. could stand handsomely by its father, each shilling for its own share of the coin. You might call them companion pieces, rather than updates or replacements.

When home consoles hit, design teams were even more modest, and were generally left to do their own thing. So starting on the NES, you will see a certain trend: successful game spawns weird, only tenuously related sequel; fans of the original scratch their heads; a greatly expanded dev team releases a third game, which is basically just the first again, on steroids; fans think it's the best thing ever, because it's exactly the same, except better! And to hell with that weird second chapter.

Thing is... usually the second game is the most interesting you'll ever see. If the series continues, it will tend to keep vamping on the third and most well-received chapter, meaning from there on the series pretty much just spins its wheels. It's that second game that tries not for perfection but to find something new and valuable to say about a now-familiar topic, that exposes the real potential of the series. It may take skill to polish a good idea, but it takes brains and bravery to come at that idea from a completely new perspective.

Spanning about a decade, here are five of those tenuous twos—not all of them so unappreciated, but all of them anomalies in one way or another. Beautiful anomalies. Each of these games has much to teach us.

Castlevania II: Simon's Quest (1988)

A few people will say this set the precedent for Symphony of the Night and all its GBA and DS rehashes. Sort of, not really; not really the point. If only Igarashi's games were so ambitious.

The original Castlevania was a stripped-down, focused port of an MSX action-adventure called Vampire Killer. With a mind to the early limitations of Nintendo's system, they took out the exploration, barriers, and inventory items, to mold a crunchy action game, all about timing and forward momentum.

Then the Famicom Disk System came around—a sort of floppy drive for the Japanese NES. That is to say, the media was rewritable. Which meant, for the first time on a game console, players could save their games. The ramifications were pretty clear: developers could design larger, more intricate, more ponderous worlds, meant to be explored rather than defeated. That in itself is an extension of what Super Mario Bros. brought to game design, but this time it was tangible.

So what Konami did is adapt and expand all the ideas cut out of Castlevania the first time around. The sequel carried on the story and basic premise of the original, but brought it to a new place and a scale never repeated.

Simon's Quest breaks the player out of the castle—not just to a courtyard or a Venice level, but into the Transylvanian countryside. There are no real bosses and no pressure except time and the player's own drive. Castlevania (that is, Castle Dracula) is only a tiny part of the game, right at the end. Most of the game consists of wandering the paths, searching for clues, as the days tick by and Simon's life drains away. Villagers are unfriendly; nighttime is dangerous. The visuals, in their simplicity, are blasted and grim. The music gives a nervous sense of purpose: you will beat this curse. You must, somehow. And if you don't, well, there's an ending for that too.

The world and structure of this game are complex. You have a huge, sidescrolling "overworld," if you will, dotted with towns, swamps, forests, caves, and rivers, each with a proper name. Everything looks and sounds and behaves differently at night. You earn money to buy whip upgrades, and you find or buy secondary items, all of which you keep in an inventory. And then there are the mansions—rather like Zelda dungeons, they are your targets. You dip in, play something a little more recognizable as Castlevania, find your artifact, and you leave.

So okay. The Zelda influence is none too subtle—yet that influence is infused with ideas and a sensibility that were already in place back on the MSX, and in application Simon's Quest is something else. Something novel, and immense.

Some of the design choices are, to a modern eye, a bit clumsy. Unless you already know where to go and what to do, good luck to you in figuring it out. It's not that the game doesn't hand out any clues; it's that it actively misleads the player. The game doesn't ever pat the player on the head, which can make it hard to feel like you're getting anywhere important. I would flip that around and say that the game gives the player an unusual and refreshing freedom to read in his own meaning to his actions—exactly what a videogame should do.

As a result, the play experience is unusually nuanced and dignified. Where most games play like bad action movies, paranoid of losing your attention, playing Simon's Quest is rather like reading a 19th century novel. Not bad for 1988.

And of course, it's the third game that gets all the attention—the one with the glitter and the sloppy level design. If you want an action game, play the first Castlevania; it's more compact, more focused, more visceral. If you want pure inspiration, go with Simon's Quest.

Castlevania II: Simon's Quest

(North American version)



Original platform: NES
(The physical cartridge is pretty common; you should be able to find a copy for around $5.00.)

Also available/playable on:
Wii Virtual Console (500 Wii Points), PC (emulated in the Konami Collector's Series: Castlevania & Contra pack, $9.99 list price).

Notes: Although the original Japanese disk version lets you save your game, the cartridge version released outside Japan has no battery back-up and so relies on 36-character passwords to record your progress. To compensate, the cartridge version has more complex music. Although the emulation gives a slightly less authentic experience, one benefit to the Wii and PC versions is the ability to save or bookmark play. Everything's a trade off.

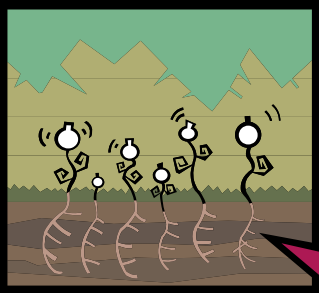
HERO: 108 水火外傳 ORIGINS

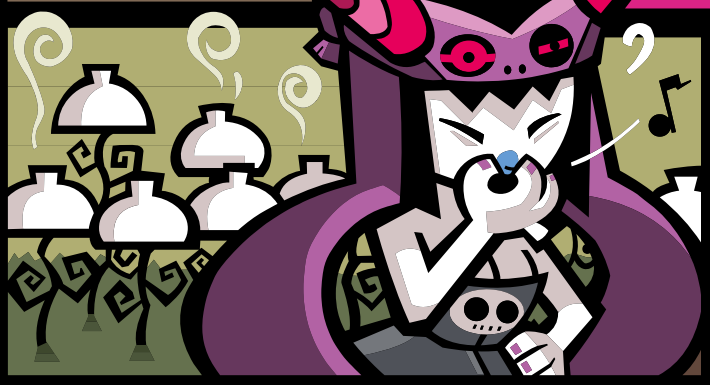
103

母夜叉 孫二娘
MYSTIQUE SONIA

Before Hero 103 joined Big Green, she owned a bun shop in the city. Mystique Sonia's buns were famous for their flavor, oddly enough, they grow from seeds that are fertilized by her own spit. She loved her work, but she hoped to do more to bring peace to the land.



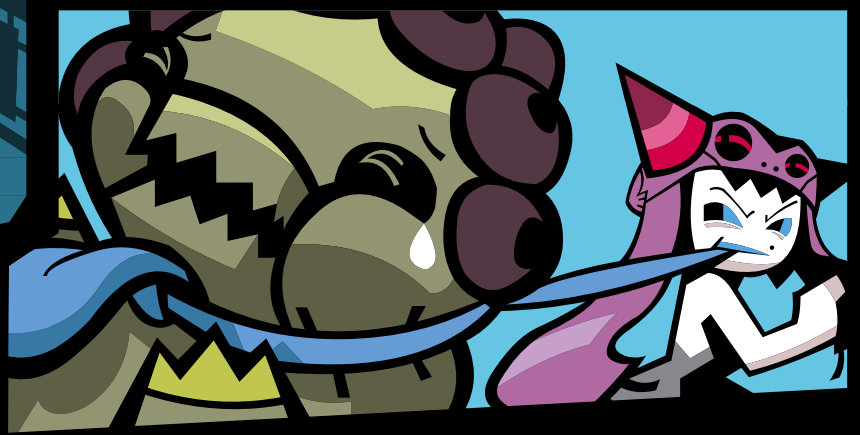
















As a civilian, Sonia helped many a fine animal see the "error" of their ways. As a member of Big Green and its elite fighting force, Fight Squad, she continues to use her special charms and warrior skills to bring an end to the war between humans and animals.

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Cartoon Network series launching in January 2010
Check out the new "Hero:108" MMOG at www.hero108online.com.

System: Xbox 360/PS3 **Developer:** Vigil Games **Publisher:** THQ **Available:** Jan. 5



DARKSIDERS

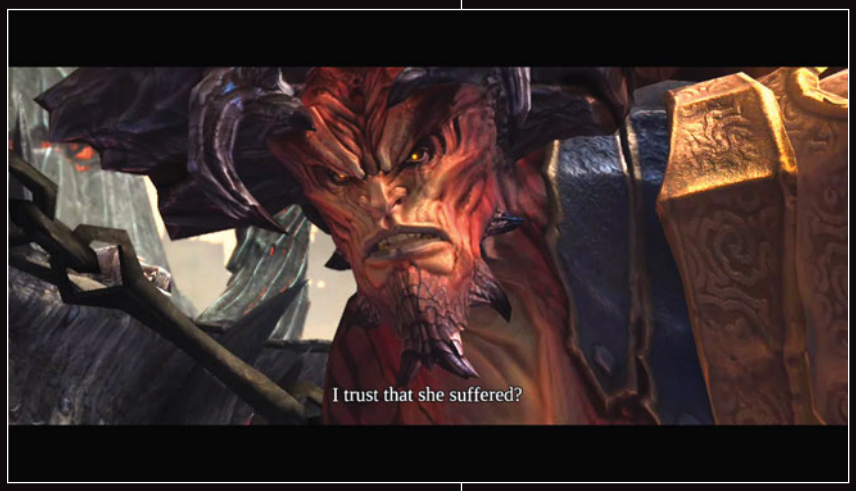
WAR'S WAR!

Within minutes playing Darksiders, you know that you're in the presence of greatness.

words **Dave Halverson**

There's no big tie-in to goose the hype machine behind Darksiders (unless you consider the book of Revelation a viable marketing tool). No movie or TV series, no action figures (although do bring them on), no graphic novel, no nothing. What they do have is one of the most visually refined, immersive and altogether robust video game experiences available on any system. But will it be enough? THQ isn't exactly the first name in premature human obliteration and I'm not sure releasing it on the same day as Bayonetta is such a hot idea (granted they're radically different games, but they still appeal to the same audience), but considering the theme (4th and goal for humanity at mid-field and the quarterback is toast), inherent street cred Joe Mad brings to the table, and what are sure to be glistening reviews from any outlet worth its URL, I say "hell yeah." If a game this altogether spectacular can't find a few hundred thousand homes maybe the end really is nigh. Show me a gamer that can resist playing the middle man in the war to end all wars between heaven and hell, and I'll show you someone who just bought Clone Wars: Republic Heroes for the bleeding edge visuals and ace writing.





Joe Madureira (aka Joe Mad) came up like so many of us during the 16- to 64-bit era, back when home consoles were life-altering miracle machines that transformed our dreary lives into colorful parallax dreamscapes. There were no flat screens, no HD, no internet, no chat apps… not an iPhone was stirring; just pure unfiltered analog magic courtesy of your friendly neighborhood predominantly Japanese video game developer. Back then gameplay, music, and graphics were everything. If you made a game that looked, sounded and played great, you sold a ton of copies, period. So that's what Vigil Games, co-founded by Joe and fellow game designer David Adams have done—made a great game. If rules still apply, it's all downhill from here.

If you're familiar with Joe's work, liken Darksiders to Battle Chasers, the original comic book series he jettisoned Uncanny X-Men to create. Like Todd McFarlane's Spawn in 1992, when Battle Chasers debuted in '98 it was the ultimate comic, especially for people not into "comics" because it looked and read more like a great video game than a cheesy man-in-tights soap opera. I've yet to meet a gamer who knows of it that doesn't wish it were a video game; a scenario that suddenly doesn't seem all that farfetched. In the meantime, what Joe brought to Battle Chasers, Vigil bring to Darksiders, with the same palpable proficiency, dedication and love of craft. The difference being where Joe was criticized for only producing two to three issues of Battle Chasers each year (which, considering the level of detail and color is admirable) game development is a much slower burn, conducive to the creative process. Within minutes playing Darksiders, you know that you're in the presence of greatness; not just great gameplay but truly magnificent character



design. It isn't until you enter the Twilight Cathedral that you realize you're basically playing a giant Zelda, but by then it's just icing on the mother of all cakes, and that's only the half of it.

The quest at hand is one of dire consequence, as War, one of the Four Horseman of the Apocalypse, heeds the call and descends upon the Earth for the End War that will determine the fate of the three kingdoms: Heaven, Hell, and Man. But something has gone terribly awry. The other Horseman are nowhere to be found and War is in a weakened state. As he meets his apparent end at the hand of Straga (literally), all is made clear (or is it?) as the Charred Council—guardians of the pact between Heaven and Hell protected by the seven seals—reel him back in. Heaven and Hell were clearly at war on Earth, but the call did not go out; the seventh seal had not been broken. Although War swears otherwise, he is charged with the premature end of days for mankind, and must pay the price. Of his own accord he asks that he be returned to Earth in his weakened state as punishment, to find out who is responsible, or to die trying, to which the council agrees, on the condition he's chaperoned by one of their own. And so back to Earth we go, bound to The Watcher (played with Joker-like zeal by Mark Hamil), armed with the Chaoseater and hell bent on getting some answers.

They say time flies when you're having fun. Well, apparently it flies a lot faster when you're meeting with the Charred Council, because upon War's return a century has passed. The Earth is but a barren wasteland of its former self and humanity is long gone. Never trust a centuries-old talking rock I guess. Only Vulgrim, War's designated shopkeeper, and the armies of the Destroyer remain; the Destroyer himself is held up in a massive tower protected by four guardians. Only by defeating the four "Chosen" and presenting their hearts to Samael, the fallen archangel commonly referred to as the Angel of Death, can War gain access to the tower where his final destiny awaits. And so it begins.

The first order of business is delivering enough souls to Vulgrim to obtain the Earthcaller—a bellowing skull of a horn whose deafening blast can wake the dead, or in this case, the slumbering gates that block your way. For the souls you reap in trade Vulgrim will creepily provide both information and tactical upgrades, including Consumables (various Essences), Wrath abilities (offensive and defensive powers that burn Wrath), and Gear and Equipment (secondary weapons and powers), all of which can be mapped onto corresponding face and shoulder buttons at the player's discretion. Darksiders makes incredible use of both the 360 and PS3 controller, utilizing every button

Darksiders' combat-to-exploration ratio simply couldn't be better, nor could the combat itself.









he bestows upon War his first Passive Ability, Shadowflight, a Raziel-like winged glide propelled by blue spheres that shoot him into the sky, and it's off to the Twilight Cathedral to see about ripping the still-beating heart out of Tiamat, a dragon-size, demonic, rather pretentious queen bat.

Vigil isn't merely emulating Zelda-style gameplay, they're making it their own, and in many ways improving on the archetype. The environmental puzzles range in difficulty from the obvious-but-challenging to the utterly complex, but never in such a way that you become irritated. Vigil has a way of goading the player through gameplay and visuals that's truly unique, as if they know exactly when to pull the chain on that light over your head. If the obvious doesn't work, keep moving. Between your surroundings and War's ever-burgeoning weapons and abilities, the answer is usually right in front of you…provided you're in the place. Beyond Shadowflight the abilities at your disposal include the Abyssal Chain, which attaches to enemies and objects as well as swing points ala classic Castlevania; Chronospheres that allow War to thwart time itself; and the Voidwalker, which grants War the power to open, pass through, and close portals—a technique Vigil weave into the games most challenging maze with sinister expertise. A massive fortress stuffed with eroding pathways, elevators, false floors, Escher-like architectural conundrums, and pretty much the coolest texture of all time, your brain may be smoking by the time it's over, but what comes next is worth every head scratching moment and more… much, much more. If anything, the size and scope of some of Darksiders' levels is what can throw you. I combed every inch of a large dilapidated spider-infested estate before it dawned on me that the village it was in was the labyrinth; the house was merely a piece in the puzzle. If all else fails, The Watcher will point you in the general direction (or humiliate you) and there's a simple yet comprehensive map, but for the most part you're still on your own, and Darksiders is a much





better game for it.

As much as I love a good Zelda or Metroid-style adventure, and Darksiders has all the features of both and more, there's much to be said for visceral combat too, provided it's given equal due, which is why the two rarely occupy the same space. Darksiders' combat-to-exploration ratio simply couldn't be better, nor could the combat itself. Not once did I find myself wishing it would subside so that I could get back to a given objective or furthering the story, which by the way is also perfectly pitched via short, concise, mostly in-game discourse. The fighting constantly evolves as you build and imbue War's repertoire, between standard, 180, Ground and Aerial moves and the many combos that go with them. And that's just using his swords. The angels and demons in Darksiders are among the best ensembles I've ever faced. Not only are they incredibly sophisticated looking; they're also equally formidable. Ranging in size and strength from puny one-hit-kill vampire bats and common ghouls (used primarily to replenish health) to swarming lesser demons, and higher demons that rival many games' core bosses such as Casters, Wraiths, and hammer-wielding Undead, who all have one thing in common—they HATE War. You have to be pretty lazy to get taken out by a lesser demon or an angel for that matter, but higher demons, which are in no short supply, are fearsome opponents that demand your full attention both offensively and defensively. They are fierce, smart, and most of all relentless. Elsewhere the mid and main bosses require as much (or more) wit as they do reflexes, but they are all in a word, epic (so overused but so apropos). Luckily so is War. Lock-on is wisely patterned after Z-targeting, the preeminent multi-enemy system utilized in Ocarina of Time and Twilight Princess ('tis none better) and the primary weapons, the Chaoseater and Armageddon Blades are serious instruments of death. Juggling is as intuitive as it gets and the various slashes, strikes, vertical and radial spins, and piercing blows can all be linked. But they can also be slow, which is where your secondary weapons come in. Like the blades, the Tremor Gauntlet and Scythe level-up by usage and can be upgraded with both special weapon enhancements (which you'll have to find) and Wrath powers making them powerful allies—the Gauntlet for pure brute force and destroying barriers, and the Scythe for numerous ranged and radial maneuvers and linking combo's with your swords. On the Gear side, the



The Destroyer chose well, but not well enough.

Crossblade is used primarily to solve environmental puzzles, although with enough Wrath can do a fair bit of damage and reap many a soul. Further bombardment comes by way of War's Chaos form, which is almost cheating unless you're seriously outgunned, as well his pistol "Mercy," an oversized hand cannon reminiscent of Beyond the Grave's Cerberus, and a pair of massive ordnance that War uses in the games super-charged shooting sequences, The Fracture Cannon, which fires and detonates explosive shards, and Redemption, a hulking blaster capable of rapid shots and pulverizing charged projectiles. Both of which can be gleaned from the enemy and used against them. There are plenty of games that offer similarly elaborate moves, vast artillery and heated close-quarters and ranged combat, but considering the level of diversity and refinement in Darksiders, along with the character and world design, animation, and control few do it as well, none of which also incorporates 20-plus hours of Zelda

...it's all beautiful, from the environments to the gameplay, to the characters, to the score...

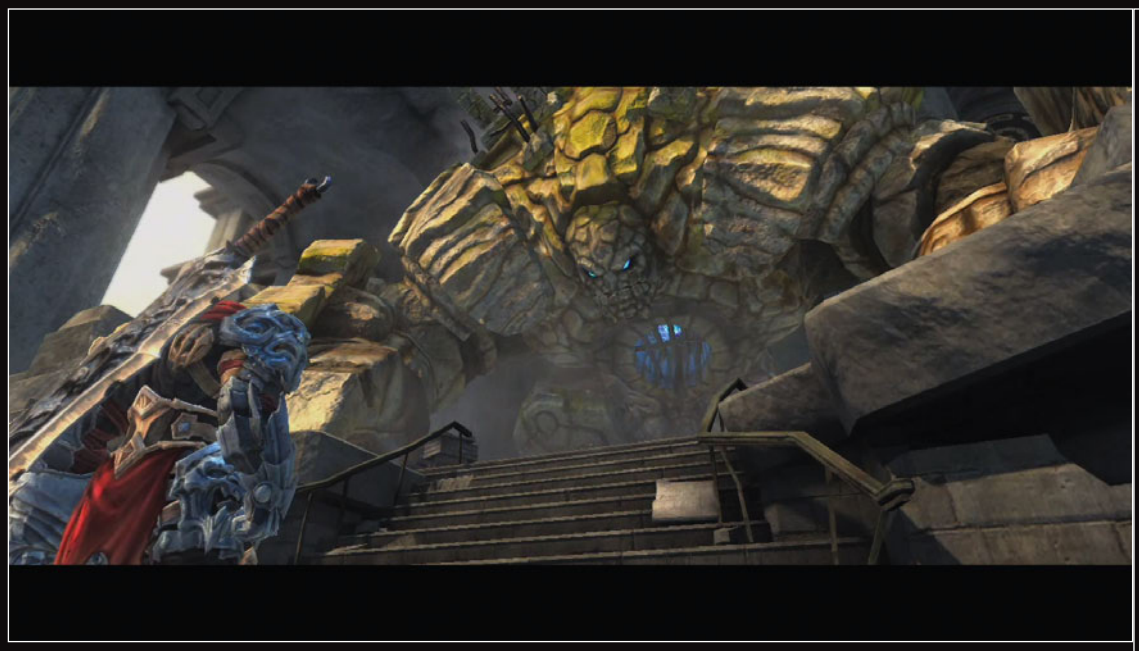




quality-wonderment and girth. To put it in perspective—taking into account that I'm screen capturing and ogling quite a bit—31 hours in, as the finale (following what I thought was the finale; I love it when they do that) draws ever near, my total time in combat is 4 hours and 43 minutes. I've racked up 2141 kills, travelled 346 miles, collected 46,139 souls, achieved a 46-hit combo and spilled 4,425 gallons of demon blood…all of which splattered and gushed with the utmost detail...

Not that I've spent 26 hours and 17 minutes solving puzzles; the cavalcade of gameplay continues. The Panzer Dragoon-inspired Angelic Mount will send you scurrying for your copy of Orta, and War's hulking, fire-breathing hell stallion Ruin is simply glorious. Building on another aspect of the legendary Zelda series (namely Ocarina and Twilight);

Below: Behold The Jailer; tons of puss-filled fun!







Soul man: Say hello to Vulgrim, your new best friend.

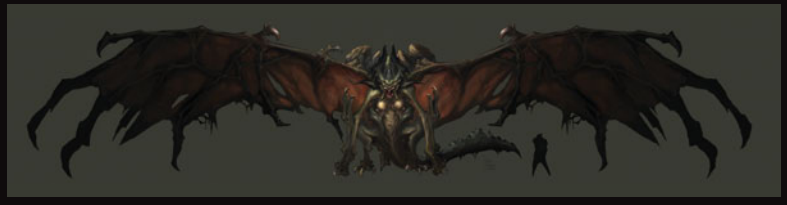
like Link's horse Epona, Ruin is limited to specific terrain, but unlike Epona, doesn't come running when you whistle a tune and where Link could fire off a few arrows on horseback, War goes to war on Ruin. Following a trek through the arid wastes, scaling primitive drilling towers to activate Chronospheres to avoid becoming a cocktail weenie for giant marauding sandworms that make Shai-Hulud look like fish bait, obtaining Ruin comes by way of a stunningly

It's everything Vigil aspired for it to be, and they aimed high.

choreographed gladiatorial battle-royale capped off by an equally inspired egress battling the Destroyer's fierce horseman and ultimately the mother of all sandworms; firing supernatural rounds into its gaping maw before finishing it off with a gruesome plummeting laceration. Aside from being the most gorgeous game-bred beast I've ever laid eyes on, Ruin also packs a mean flaming kick that turns rear-approaching demons into rear projectiles and when summoned emerges from the ground in a blazing streak of fire; 'tis a beautiful thing.

That's the thing about Darksiders: it's all beautiful, from the environments to the gameplay, to the characters, to the score that courses through it. It's everything Vigil aspired for it to be, and they aimed high. Rather than attempt to reinvent the wheel or emulate a single archetype, they've taken the best gameplay elements from the most universally revered games of the past and made them their own, integrating them into a single epic that has all of the intrinsic hallmarks that define a studio capable of producing the kind of classic Darksiders is destined to be. If ever there was a pure gamer's game, Darksiders is it.

INTERVIEW ▸



INTERVIEW

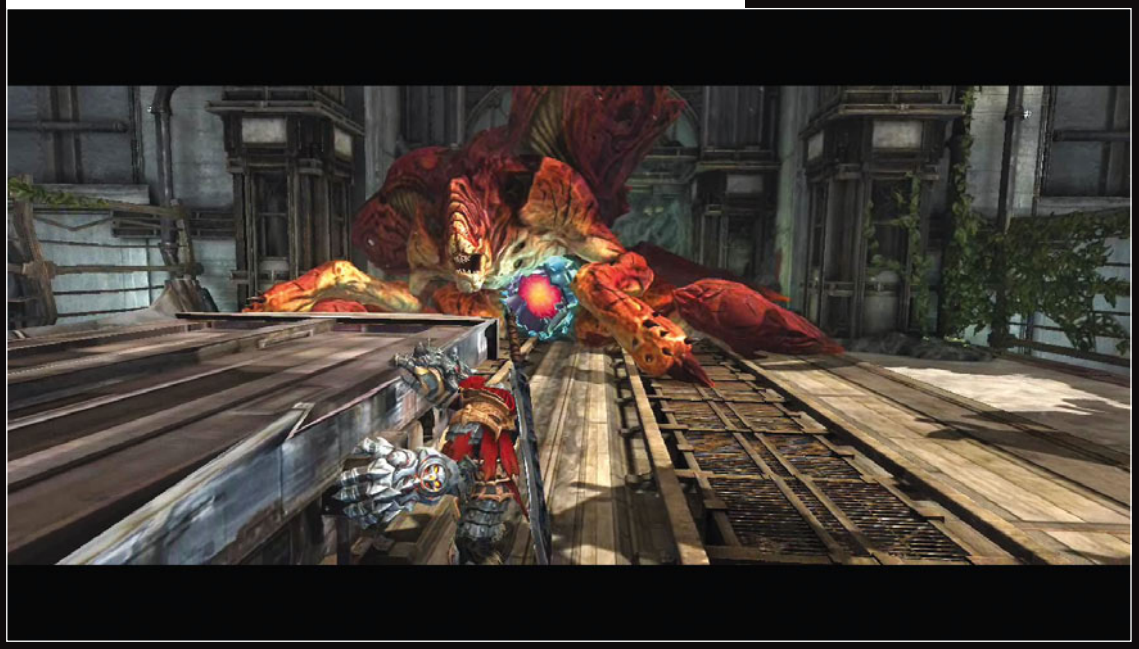
An interview of biblical proportions with Vigil Games' General Manager David Adams and Creative Director Joe Madureira

play: I've heard Darksiders compared to God of War and Devil May Cry although it's more Zelda than anything else, with shades of the very best games of the last two decades mixed in, from Castlevania, to Soul Reaver, to Panzer Dragoon, to Prince of Persia. Is the combination of play mechanics and scenarios that make up Darksiders the product of a singular vision or several influences coming together?
David: Funny enough, when we first started planning out Darksiders, I had personally never played Devil May Cry, God of War or other games of that ilk. Most of our inspiration came from more old school games – Zelda, Castlevania, etc… At the end of the day, though, we just wanted to make the coolest adventure game possible – and whatever made sense within that mold we put into the game. Adventure is all about exploring new places and trying new things, so we made sure Darksiders delivered on that in spades – the end result is a recipe pulled from many different influences, past games and our own crazy ideas.

Aspiring to the greats is one thing but meeting or exceeding those expectations is another. How does a first-time developer emulate gameplay from a collective of gaming's very best while devising puzzles as good as or better than the Zeldas, Reavers, and Raiders of the world?
David: Hah! That's quite flattering. Really we live by a single credo – make everything as good as humanly possible. It requires a lot of iteration, second-guessing, trying things and failing, admitting that something you've done sucks, etc… Sometimes you nail something first try, and sometimes you have to do it 10 times before getting it right. Often it involves doing something that makes people feel uncomfortable – for instance, scrapping a whole level and starting over because it's just not "fun" enough. It's scary, but you just have to believe the gamble will ultimately pay off.
The key is that commitment to quality – and fun. Then you just have to hope that you've won more battles than you lost – and at the end of the day, the people playing your game will be the final judges.

...everywhere you turn, every rock you climb over should reward the player with something new and remarkable.





Speaking of nailing things, Darksiders' boss encounters are evocative of games like Ocarina of Time and Twilight Princess, only in some cases better, given the tactics involved in bringing them down. Was there a lot of trial and error involved in their individual design, tactics, attacks and so forth? Any personal favorites?
David: Designing and creating bosses can be a lot of fun – but it's also a total pain in the ass. You generally come up with a basic plan of how you want the fight to play out, but at the end of the day, getting it to feel right is a lot of trial and error – and a lot of alterations to your original plan. We wanted the bosses in Darksiders to be one part puzzle and one part combat, to combine the use of items you acquired in the game in some interesting way, but also to involve you pounding on the boss so you get proper satisfaction. Finding that balance is tricky.
As for a favorite moment… that's a tough one. Seeing Straga lift up the street was fairly satisfying from a developer point of view. It's one of those things where someone sitting in your office jokingly says "hah… maybe he could lift up the street." And you realize that you might actually be able to pull it off. Then everybody chips in: animation, a designer, fx, sound, etc… and next thing you know it's in the game and looks awesome. Definitely satisfying.

Something else I really love is the way you approach quick time events...by not approaching them. The first time I saw the "B" (or circle) flash I was like, "here we go…" but then, that was it. Rather than making me press buttons like a trained monkey, I actually got to watch the fruits of my labor and your programming as War proceeded to do the gutting (that sand worm's gonna have a nasty scar). How'd this come about? Did anyone object?
David: This was a topic of debate for quite some time. We loved the cinematic glory of a quick kill animation, but having the mini-game where you have to press multiple buttons wasn't really in-line with the scope of our game. We actually went through a myriad of ideas and implementation (even had a golf swing like sweet spot idea for quick kills). However, ultimately we kept the visual satisfaction of the quick kill, sans mini-game.

I also personally love beasts and you've got two worth their weight in Demon Growth (such a cool texture BTW). The Panzer Dragoon-like Angelic Mount stage was as awesome as it was unexpected, and give me a horse and I'm a happy camper. Ruin is amazing, and provides some great gameplay. I only wish there were more. Were you concerned that too much





Ruin play would deter from the overall flow?
David: Both Ruin and the Angelic Beast were part of a general "keep the experience fresh by having the player constantly do new stuff" mentality. We originally had more areas planned that featured Ruin – but soon realized we were completely crazy and could never get all those areas finished in a reasonable amount of time. This cut down a bit on how much you got to use the horse. To make up for this, we tried to make the time you spent with the beast as memorable as possible.

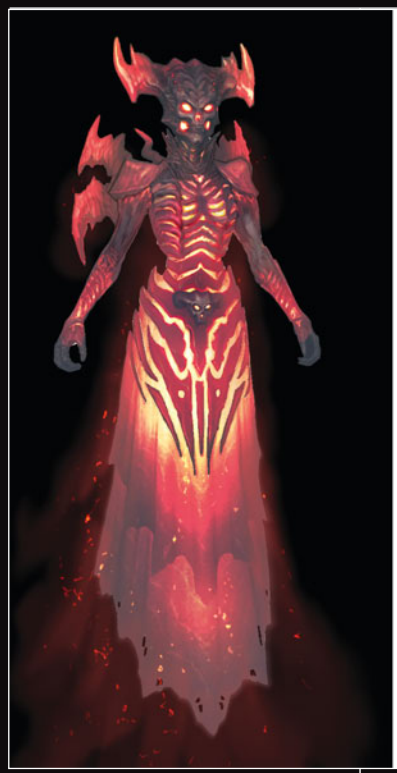
Given the number weapons in the game and all the variables considering all the Passive Abilities, Gear, Equipment, Consumables, and Wrath Powers, how did you manage to integrate so much and balance everything so astutely your first time out?
David: Luck. Seriously, like I've said it was a lot of trial and error – and iteration. We definitely have a lot of toys for the main character – more than most games – and balancing them all together was tricky. Trying to find both puzzle and combat uses for all the gear items, and balancing all of that with different weapons, guns, and powers was a pain. At the end of the day if people just have fun tooling around with everything in the game: pulling a guy towards them with the Abyssal Chain, then launching them into the air and shooting them with a gun…Or knocking guys down by blowing cars into them with the Earthcaller…or just pounding a guy with a parking meter – then that's our measure of success.

As varied as I found the gameplay—and it's great top to bottom—without the spectacle it wouldn't be near as resonant. Darksiders is also a game of moments. Emerging from an underground region or secret pool, cresting a precipice, or progressing through a network of rooms or chambers, it's a never-ending barrage of climactic visual events. The sense of awe and wonder is ceaseless… I got a real sense of a screenplay and cinematography playing Darksiders. Did you flush all this out beforehand or as the development deemed?
David: We really wanted Darksiders to be equal parts action and adventure. To us that means that everywhere you turn, every rock you climb over should reward the player with something new and remarkable. A lot of locations and moments, surprisingly, survived some of our initial brainstorms – but a lot were just developed organically along the way. Sometimes you just have to start building the world and walk around in it...and then—wham!—an idea for some cool event pops into your head. I'd like to say we planned it all out in advance, but really it's an even split between planning and spur of the moment ideas.

It wouldn't be nearly as powerful were it not for the architecture. Even the best time-released orchestral opus can't make the uninspired inspiring. The architecture in Darksiders is some of the best ever. Every time I thought "Okay, that's it; it can't get any better…" it did. Although I have to say Silithas Loom destroyed me. I must have looked around for an hour. What went into selecting and then assembling the areas that make up the overall game world?
David: As I said before, variety was key. Each area you entered needed to look completely different from the one you came from. We really just wanted to take earth, and turn it into a fantasy world. We are all HUGE fans of fantasy, but a story about the four horsemen doesn't have much impact unless it is placed on earth, in familiar settings. So we decided to take earth, let it incubate for a hundred years under the stewardship of demons – and try to imagine what would become of that. On top of that, we didn't want to world to be horrid and depressing – we wanted it to feel tragic, but beautiful. We hope the end result is something that is both familiar, and yet completely fantastic – with a mixture of decay and beauty.
Regarding the characters design and models themselves, this past year, playing at THQ and E3, I'd been staring at Tiamat thinking she must be one of the big payoff bosses towards the end. Even a studio helmed by Joe Mad couldn't achieve that level of complexity for the duration. It would take forever and cost an ungodly sum... Five minutes into the game I'm speaking with a demon (Straga) having rammed my sword into an eye socket half my size, followed by talking to a "gate" the size of an apartment building. What really sealed it though was Samael. The detail in his face together with the dialogue blew me away…and wouldn't you know it; the first Chosen he sends me to relieve of its still beating heart…Tiamat! She's the first main boss!? The characters throughout are simply in a class by themselves.

What's the story behind their development? Are they all Joe's designs? Can you take us through the process leading up to what we

Sometimes you just have to start building the world and walk around in it...and then—wham!—an idea for some cool event pops into your head.







see on screen? Is this a proprietary technique or did Joe just find someone this good?
David:: I wish there was some proprietary technique! It would make life so much easier. In the end, it comes down to a combination of the people that we have on our team and the time that we have to iterate. Our process is very organic. We do our very best to cull the coolest idea from the team…it can come from Joe or it can come from elsewhere. We are fortunate to have a group of extremely talented and experienced concept artists and their work is on display throughout Darksiders. The secret sauce is our ability to sense when we've nailed it… when we've made the optimal choice, but also to have the courage to abandon something and keep digging. A lot of times, opting to kill something or start over is very scary, especially when making a game that is this big, but we feel that by not being afraid to accept nothing less than awesome is what makes our studio a special place to work.

What lead you to go with an intermittent score over a Castlevania like composition-per-level type arrangement?
David: We really wanted to deliver a more desolate, emotional soundscape that reinforces the Apocalyptic theme of our game and felt more organic than a typical game score. We hope that the haunting, barren tones blended with the heroic beats enhance the player's experience with our game.

It was a long road to Vigil, was it not? You must feel incredibly proud right now. What's it been like putting together the studio, and launching your first game? What have been some of the biggest challenges?
Joe: It has been an amazing experience overall, but it has not been without its heartaches. The task of growing the studio, building the technology and making the game all at the same time takes its toll. The biggest challenge though has been working to foster the right kind of collaborative environment that allows for maximum creativity while still keeping the forward momentum that we need to have to complete the project. Communication is the key component. We have a lot of talented people here at Vigil and making sure that their ideas are heard and have a chance to affect the game for the better is a constant struggle, especially the bigger we get!

You certainly found the right publisher. THQ have let you make the game you wanted to make. Was it a difficult task finding a publisher to get behind a major project and give you creative freedom?
Joe: It was a rare find. When we first started pitching this game, some publishers really liked the idea, but would not take a chance on a startup studio. Before we closed the deal with THQ, we were actually considering working on an established franchise for another publisher just so we could establish a track record and increase the chances of getting to make Darksiders in the future. Luckily, THQ stepped up to the plate and let us skip the interim plan and get busy on making Darksiders as awesome as we could make it.

What's it like working with Joe?
David: Joe is an incredibly creative guy and influences creative decisions at the studio across multiple disciplines. His designs and original artwork are inspiring and really get the studio excited and pumped about what they working on. Joe is also extremely self-critical and believes whole-heartedly in the iterative process. Joe is also crazy about games and his knowledge goes way back. Most people know about Joe's comic background, but what they typically don't know is how long Joe has been playing games and how passionate he is about them. And we couldn't do what we do or work as hard as we work without Joe's sense of humor and penchant for pranks! play

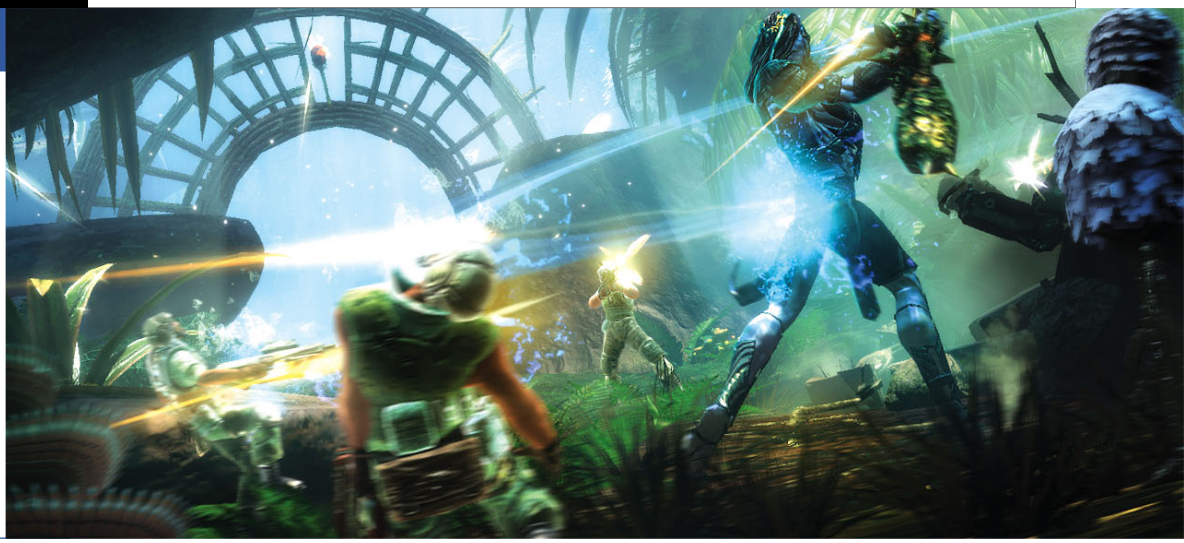


System: 360, PS3, PC **Developer:** Ubisoft **Publisher:** Ubisoft **Available:** December

James Cameron's Avatar The Game

King of a new world

words Matt Cabral



Anyone who's read any of my reviews of movie-based games knows I, more than most, have an appreciation for the oft-maligned genre—yes, I'm the guy who gave G.I Joe an 8/10. But, because they're often based on properties I'm passionate about, and I sympathize with the various budget and scheduling limitations the developers are faced with, more often than not, I'll see the silver lining in these big screen adaptations. So, it goes without saying, James Cameron's Avatar: The Game has me as excited as I am for seasonal blockbuster series such as Modern Warfare and Assassin's Creed 2.

Now, my enthusiasm for Ubisoft's take on Cameron's next big thing isn't solely based on my stubborn tendency to give licensed games the benefit of the doubt; I'm also intrigued by its promising pedigree as well as my own time behind a game pad. For starters—without even considering the fact James Cameron arguably only puts his King-of-the-world stamp on the most polished productions—consider that Ubi previously pulled off the impossible: They made a damn fine game out of Peter Jackson's King Kong! Sure, it wasn't perfect, but creating even a decent interactive experience from a property that had absolutely no right to have its own game adaptation, demands my attention.



A land of pure fantasy...





More than this potential, though, it was my brief hands-on time that's got me eagerly awaiting its final release. Based on events taking place before the film, players assume the role of a futuristic badass that makes Master Chief look like a tin can with a ray gun. On the lush alien planet of Pandora, you'll turn the pretty foliage into a finely chopped Caesar salad with the expected high-powered guns and gear. Even cooler, though, Avatar isn't shy about giving you the best toys early on in the campaign; from mounted canons and baddie-stomping mechs, to ground and air-based vehicles, you'll rely on the high-tech hardware as much as the death-dealers dangling from your belt.

Good thing you're armed to the teeth, too, as Avatar's bad guys (or maybe good?) are the indigenous Na'vi. Despite a reliance on decidedly old-school weapons such as bows and arrows and staffs, these 10-foot tall blue behemoths are super fast, super stealthy, and super pissed that you're ruining their planet to exploit a rare resource. The game's graphics and gunplay alone make for a more than serviceable third-person shooter, but the option to side with these big blues, and become one of them, is what really separates it from the Gears of War-wannabes. Slicing and dicing, with blinding speed and accuracy, through human adversaries made me feel like the Predator when he turned Arnie's team into baby food. Their acrobatics truly make them a smart choice, even in the face of flying hot lead. But the ability to play as them also injects some effective emotion into the narrative. Early on, you won't even consider donning the blue skin of these seemingly primitive creatures, but once you understand their side of the story, expect to have your emotions twisted as they were during *District 9*. Much of the early buzz surrounding this title has been of its ability to be played in stereoscopic 3D. However, after my brief time among the people of Pandora, I'm confident even non-Donald Trumps will be able to appreciate this sci-fi epic. play

Avatar isn't shy about giving you the best toys early on in the campaign.


JINX
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Get Into It.
Justin Wong
Pro Gamer • Empire Arcadia
National Street Fighter IV Champion

System: PC, PS3, Xbox 360 **Developer:** 2K Marin, 2K Australia, Digital Extremes and 2K China **Publisher:** 2K Games **Available:** February 9, 2010

BioShock 2

Into the deep...

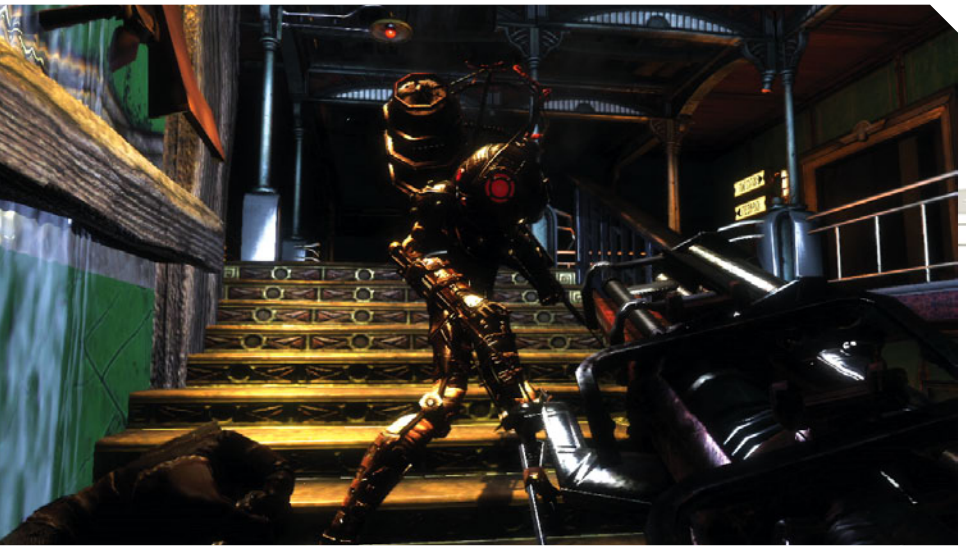
words Douglass C. Perry

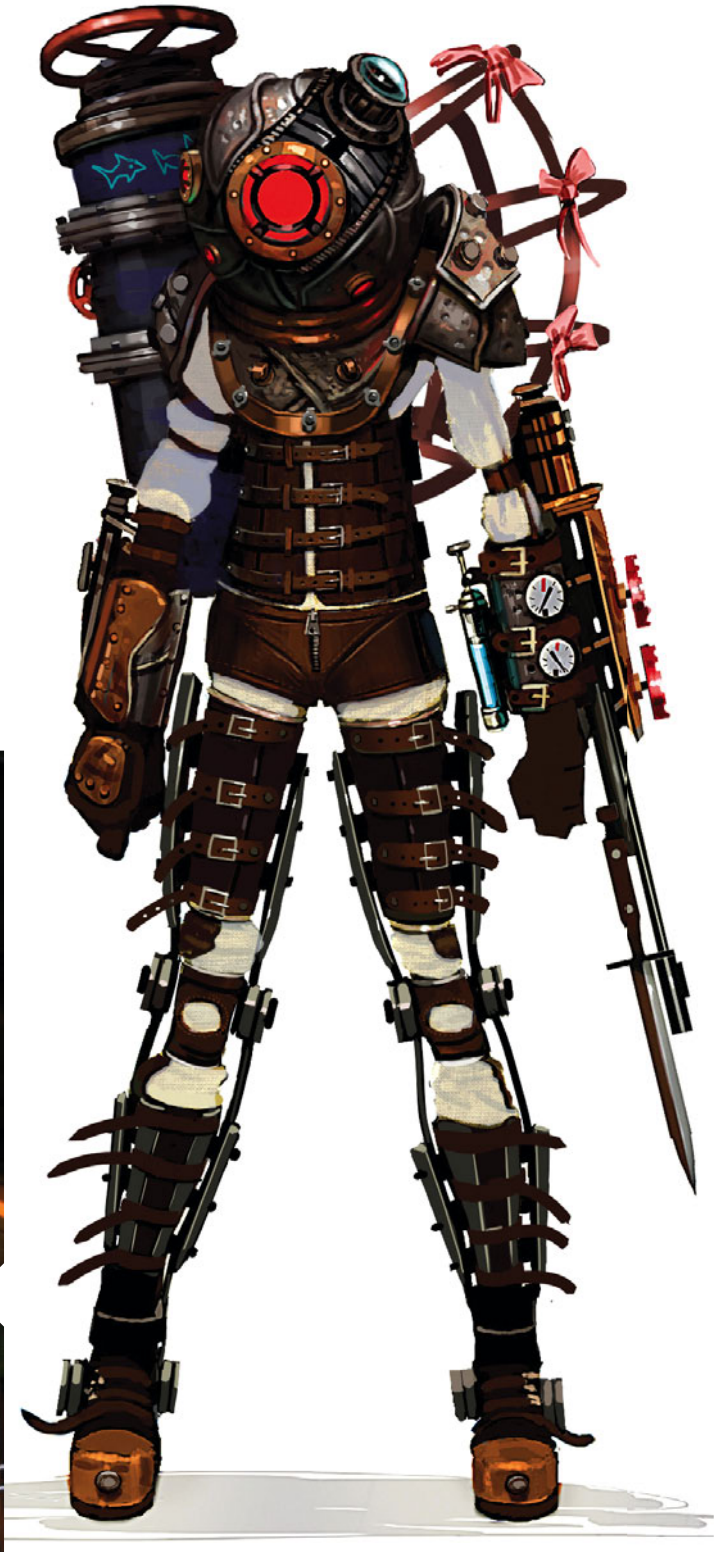
Great storytelling in videogames is rare. Perhaps that's why the metaphoric underwater city of Rapture, packed with dualities, brimming with broken philosophical ideals, and haunted with humanity's mistakes, captures our imagination so readily. With 2K Marin taking over the reigns from Creative Director Ken Levine and 2K Boston, the sequel to 2007's award-winning RPG-infused first-person shooter Bioshock is preparing to pull you back down into its city of broken dreams with a new storyline and a completely new multiplayer mode.

Dark Lights, Dead City

In the original single-player game, you played the role of a young man on the brink of an illustrious career, whose aircraft unfortunately crashes into the Atlantic, sending him into the once-thriving city built at the bottom of the sea, Rapture. You discover a civilization torn apart by a mutagen called Adam that enhances human abilities but comes at a deadly cost. BioShock 2 starts 10 years after the first game ends, and 2K Marin, led by Creative Director Jordan Thomas, places you into the heavy diving suit







Rapture is in ruins, and its once brimming city is now inhabited by stronger, more powerful Adam-hungry addicts...



of a prototype Big Daddy, a monstrous, Adam-enhanced former human who suddenly awakens and is driven to find his Little Sister, to whom he is programmed to protect.

But the world has changed. Rapture is in ruins, and its once brimming city is now inhabited by stronger, more powerful Adam-hungry addicts, its glass walls crackle under the ocean's heavy force, and former lively sectors like the newly-introduced Siren Alley, once thriving with architects and designers, have become seedy red light districts. Led by the communist-styled Sophia Lamb, the ideological antithesis to Rapture's founder Andrew Ryan, the city's remaining inhabitants have devolved into linebacker-like Brute Splicers, a line of new Big Daddies, and looming behind the shadows of them all is the game's new, powerful creation, the Big Sister.





Splice and Dice

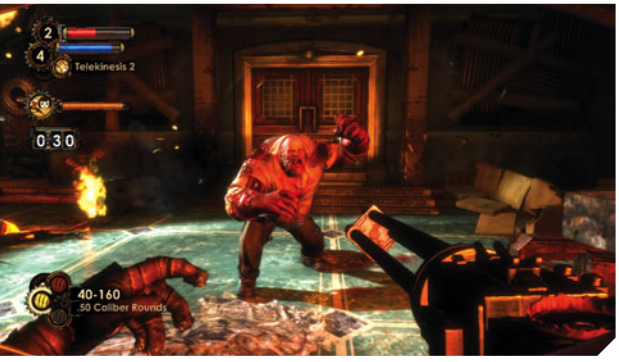
In our hands-on session with the single-player campaign and the newly introduced multiplayer game, we found BioShock 2 in good hands. The Big Daddy controls quickly and smoothly, even weighed down with the diving suit, clunky helmet, and power-drill mounted on his right hand. In our demo we approach and attack a new Big Daddy type known as the Rumbler, a defensive-minded

Step into the darkness, step into the light...













creature that flings out a perimeter of security turrets to defend his Little Sister. As soon as the battle erupts, a cacophony of Splicers appears, including the new ram-minded Brute, who we intermittently drill, freeze with a Wintery Blast, and then pelt with shotgun shells, a now-classic BioShock 1 plasmid/weapon mix. The new combat system enables mixing plasmids, so we could have easily tossed down cyclones and set them on fire with Incinerate, or juxtaposed Winter Blasts with the Aero Dash, electrified a watery geyser, or even mixed an Electro Blast with a Geyser Trap, which would shock an enemy and then send them flying into the rafters. Needless to say, BioShock 2's creative mixing is strikingly fun.

After dispatching the Brute Splicer we move our attention to the Rumbler, removing all his security turrets with our own, and mixing plasmid telekinesis attacks, lunging drill attacks, and Winter Blasts, until the Little Sister is ours. Like the original, you can take the evil route, harvesting the bright-eyed child for Adam, or use the new recruiting option. We choose the latter, and the Little Sister smiles and jumps on our shoulders; now the task of defending her is upon us. Throughout BioShock 2, you'll follow the Little Sister's nose, as she sniffs out Adam-filled bodies using pheromone trails. Once located, the tables turn, and you'll defend her.

Taking it to the Streets

BioShock 2 takes the plasmid/gun elements introduced in BioShock 1 and elevates them all into a new sphere of complex customization. You'll upgrade and enhance yourself with new plasmids, gene tonics, weapons, and weapon upgrades, and after getting a renewed grip on them, you'll be amply ready for the multiplayer battle, handled by Canadian developer, Digital Extremes (Dark Sector).

With up to 10 players online (any more and the balance felt off, said Hogarth "Hogie" de la Plante, lead environmental artist), BioShock 2's multiplayer mode has a story all its own. Taking place before the events in BioShock 1, you'll slip into the shoes of desperate, ordinary citizens who have volunteered to "test" Adam enhancements prior to the civil war that destroyed Rapture. Every aspect—art direction, storyline, and the maps themselves—is surprisingly, seamlessly built into the dark framework of the original BioShock.

You can outfit your characters with masks, rabbit ears, hats, and various melee weapons beforehand (ordinary items like candlesticks, brooms, etc.), and each character rambles off strange monologues during gameplay that reflect the darkening state of their addiction/metamorphoses. The five multiplayer modes include Survival of the Fittest (free-for-all), Civil War (five-on-five team battle), Adam Grab (get the most Adam), Capture the Sister (team-based offense and defense), Turf War (King of the Hill).

The multiplayer mode is more streamlined in some ways than the campaign, but it's more customizable in others. You'll be equipped with only two weapons and two plasmids per loadout into one of three pre-customized loadouts. If you don't like the lay of the land, you can switch loadouts during gameplay.

Somewhat like Call of Duty 4's reward system, BioShock 2 rewards you with accumulative growth. The more kills, headshots, kill streaks, Big Daddy kills, etc, you complete, the more plasmids, tonics, weapons, armor, and upgrades you'll get. During fights, you'll recognize many of the intelligently designed maps come from BioShock 1, and you'll discover new hidden vents, secondary routes, and secrets, including finding a hidden Big Daddy suit! Needless to say, the multiplayer is in good hands, it feels like BioShock, and we're eager to spend another several dozen hours frolicking in the fort. play

Throughout BioShock 2, you'll follow the Little Sister's nose, as she sniffs out Adam-filled bodies.



These adorable little girls are back to no good...

Suffering from crossover fatigue?

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System: PS3, Xbox 360 **Developer:** Ninja Theory **Publisher:** Namco Bandai **Available:** 2010

Enslaved

words Douglass C. Perry

Ninja Theory aims to unshackle the post apocalyptic cliché game.



Early-adopting PlayStation 3 owners worth their salt know Ninja Theory. The developer behind the PS3 exclusive Heavenly Sword, Ninja Theory's game brought a dazzlingly animated action game early to the console and lit up gamers' HD screens with fluid button-mashing and gorgeous sword play. Two years later, the team brings its pyrotechnical skills to both the PS3 and Xbox 360 with a different effort, Enslaved, a "tactical action-adventure game."

Citing the ancient Chinese text "Journey to the West"—considered one of four great novels in Chinese literature (apparently there are only three others)—as an influence, Ninja Theory brings third-person combat to an adventure peppered with platforming and a clever dual-character dynamic. Ninja Theory has also drawn a line in the sand. This is a single-player game that doesn't support multiplayer or support co-op; and it's not online. It's a focused, character- and story-driven game.

To support this approach, Ninja Theory tapped a trio of Hollywood talent to infuse its game with skilled voice talent, expertly composed music, and top-notch writing. Screenwriter and novelist Alex Garland (The Beach, 28 Days Later) has written a post-apocalyptic narrative starring an angry young loner, Monkey, and a technically brilliant community-minded woman, Trip, who band together for a dangerous voyage across the U.S. Composer and musician Nitin Sawhney will compose the music behind their exploits, and Andy Serkis (Gollum in Lord of the Rings) provides the physical motion behind Monkey, script writing, and direction to the game. (Serkis was also the villain King Bohan in Heavenly Sword).

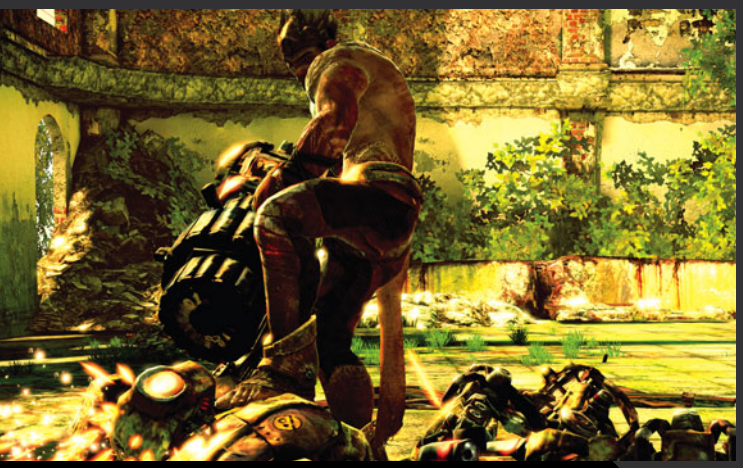
The game begins 150 years in the future when a global high-tech robot battle has decimated the Earth, forcing the few remaining humans to live in small pockets outside cities and major industrial areas. Automated robots run the entire world, some of which fight each other, but all of which are programmed to hunt down and kill humans. Enter Monkey and Trip. Captured and shackled in the same flying slave ship, Trip observes Monkey's physical prowess during some on-board fisticuffs. It's then she realizes this blond, ripped loner is her escape ticket. She rewires a technically advanced headband, plugs it into his skull and, simply put, enslaves him: Monkey is forced to help, protect, and keep Trip alive. With his "help," they force the slave craft to crash land in the remnants of New York.

Once on the ground, you control Monkey, who's equipped with a retractable metal staff, his fists and feet, the ability to jump, climb, shimmy, and hang on most any object, and a miniature robotic dragonfly. He also wears electronically sophisticated gloves that create a shield around him, preventing enemy gunfire from injuring him. Trip is essentially useless in combat, wielding only a handheld EMP device to temporarily shock enemies. By pressing the left shoulder button, you can command her to

True power stems from the staff...





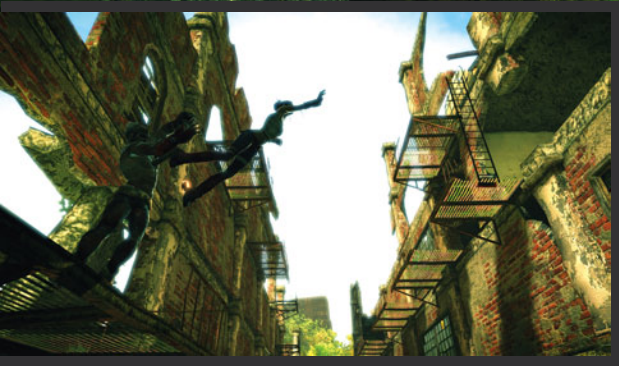


come, stay, or distract. Her wave is a goofy little spastic wiggle that's kind of cute. In each new area, you'll need to find a safe place for Trip first, and then explore solo.

The little dragonfly comes in handy in this respect, as it digitally identifies the locations and type of patrolling robots, nearly all of which are set with trigger alarms to alert other robots. Your goal is to first identify the hidden enemies in a particular setting—once the Dragonfly identifies them, the radius of their patrol appears—and then figure out how best to navigate it. Even at this early stage, the character textures and animations look impressive, as Monkey's fluid movement is already fast and seamless, and he's can agilely jump around like a, um, well, you know…a monkey.

While your dragonfly droid sets the stage, you'll have to employ the tactics. The open environments provide multiple strategies for attack. You can just walk in and try to take on all enemies at once, but that tactic quickly proves difficult (you'll be overwhelmed and die). You can sneak past sentry guards, crawl up ladders and platformy structures and then use the Dpad to command Trip to distract sentries, and then clamber behind and silently kill them. In short, because of the overwhelming odds, you'll need to study the landscape and pick off enemies one by one to reach your goal. Sometimes, you'll want to sneak past guards with Trip; you can mount her on your shoulder to do so. Monkey's physical strength enables him to grapple gun-wielding robots and tear their limbs off, using their guns against them. He also performs finishing moves after stunning robots, reaching in and pulling their CPUs out, bashing their heads in, or detonating them. I watched several







Your goal is to first identify the hidden enemies in a particular setting...





Unlike most post-apocalyptic games, this one packs a lively palette, with organic greens and blues, oranges and rust colors...

different brutal and satisfying takedowns that made me dribble a little bit.

Enslaved, as you might have guessed, is a beautiful game packed with unusual characters. Unlike most post-apocalyptic games, this one packs a lively palette, with organic greens and blues, oranges and rust colors—not the brown and black affairs we're so used to. It's also clear Ninja Theory and writer Garland have gone into this project with the intention of creating a push-pull tension between Monkey and Trip, both physically and emotionally, a major thread of interest that should develop more as the game progresses. Given what I've seen so far, Enslaved has more than captured my imagination. play



Monkey, meet machine.



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System: 360, PC **Developer:** Remedy Entertainment v **Publisher:** Microsoft **Available:** Spring 2010

Alan Wake

A nightmare you have while you're A Wake!

words Heather Anne Campbell

While the release of Alan Wake is still a while off, the excitement is already brewing. Coming in 2010 to a 360 near you, Alan Wake tells the story of a washed-up writer who heads to the countryside, trying to undo his writer's block by taking a retreat with his girlfriend. When she vanishes into the town of Bright Falls, Alan sets out to find her, but soon realizes that she is trapped within a terrifying world of his own creation. Using light to battle his foes, Alan carries his trusty flashlight and works his way through this waking nightmare, in a game inspired by the best of episodic television and horror film. From a snappy trailer at E3 2009, Alan Wake has settled into a prominent position on our gaming radar, as the light-based combat looks both novel and exciting.

Play got a chance to interview Oskari Häkkinen, Head of Franchise Development, and Matias Myllyrinne, Managing Director of Alan Wake, and we asked not only about the game, but horror in general. What follows is a glimpse into the development process as the game nears completion.

We wanted to make an action game and knew the type of main character we wanted – not an action hero but rather someone intelligent and a personality people could relate to, an everyman in a tough situation.

~Oskari Häkkinen,
Head of Franchise Developmen

play: Horror games are the new horror movies. What about games makes it easier to manipulate our fears?
Oskari Häkkinen: We at Remedy are really trying to establish the first real thriller in games with Alan Wake, and we feel that a thriller is somewhat different to horror. I hate to generalize, but to me horror often does come across as buckets of blood spraying around, infected zombies or giant spiders, whereas thrillers are something more cerebral, mature, holding a clever story that keeps the viewer on their toes. By controlling the atmosphere, the setting and the events that play out in the story, we can manipulate the player, tapping into some of their most basic primal fears. It's the well known "knife on the table scenario," it's there but when you turn away and turn back it's gone. Firstly your brain registers something is missing and then that it's the knife, it's those few seconds of realization that we capture to make a memorable gaming moment. With games we can take it to the next level, whereas in a movie you are purely a spectator, in games the player is totally immersed in the experience and in control of his actions, he/she is playing out their own thriller and that's exhilarating. It's hard to get right and it's taken us a long time, but we are really pleased with where we're at with Alan Wake and I think it will be realized as a fresh experience to video games when people get their hands on it.

What are some of the basic tricks to making a game scary?
With Alan Wake we are building a Psychological Action Thriller. We play with subjective and objective reality and make the player debate whether these events are really happening, a figment of a writer's imagination, or just a bad dream. Whilst this is certainly not a "basic trick," it is something that's working for us and turning out to be very chilling. Again, we are really trying to establish a thriller with Alan Wake. We also get a lot of inspiration from some of the pop culture greats like Stephen King, Alfred Hitchcock, David Lynch amongst others.

Alan Wake isn't our typical hero. He's not a Spartan, nor a tomb-raiding adventurer; he's a writer. As a writer myself, I know we're not always at our peak, physically. How is Alan's profession represented within the game?
You're absolutely right, Alan Wake is a civilian and a writer. When we set out on this project we knew a few things, we wanted to make an action game and knew the type of main character we wanted—not an action hero but rather someone intelligent and a personality people could relate to, an everyman in a tough situation. To research his previous books Alan Wake has been to the shooting range, so he knows how to use a gun. He is a resourceful and clever guy, the player should get the feeling of what he can and can't do.



Is he harder to control? Does he suffer from a lack of dexterity or stamina? How quickly does he overcome his weaknesses?
Wake doesn't have any such hand to eye coordination issues and he's in reasonably good shape, he's not harder to control per se but sure, he doesn't have super powers. However, in a state of panic and fear Wake believes he has the ability to will his light source to burn brighter, and thus burn away this dark presence that protects the objects it possesses. The dark presence is taking over everything in its path in Bright Falls and turning them violently against Wake, only a strong light can defeat them.

It's been widely reported that Alan Wake is inspired by serial television. What are the strengths of this kind of narrative, and how does Wake emulate them?
That's correct, we chose the stylization and pace to be like that of a modern day TV series. We have felt this works really well for us as we try to deliver a rollercoaster experience. Whereas a game structured like a movie could get diluted over the length of an entire game, the TV structure has allowed us to build up to key moments and implement exciting cliffhangers. Also using "Tonight on Alan Wake" to set up the forthcomings of an episode can be quite compelling, but I'm not going to say more than that… "To be continued"

What does TV have that games lack?
An established and standardized technology, really with games we are still reinventing "the camera" i.e. methods and tools every few years. This is exciting but also very demanding, as the way we create games changes dramatically—new skill sets and techniques must be mastered in a short period of time or you have to find companies and partners who specialize in this. Facial motion capture, location scouting, stylists, stuntmen etc. are all part of the course today for a blockbuster title such as Alan Wake. Not too many years ago this would have been a pipe dream—not to mention what leaps graphics and animation have taken.

Alan Wake's core game-play element centers on light and darkness. Do you feel that—as graphics become more broadly realistic—that games will be forced to make these stylistic choices to separate themselves



from the pack?
Matias Myllyrinne: I think we have always wanted to make stylistic choices and followed our creative vision. This really is what should drive the creative process—passion and vision for creating something cool and unique.

Do you see a future where color, light, and camera are the distinctive elements of a game?
With improved visual fidelity the palette at our disposal is just much larger… just like certain films have a distinctive style and feel which is very subtle. I mean if you think of the film *Insomnia* with Al Pacino you have a distinctive blue tint to it while *Seven* with Brad Pitt has a brownish rust-colored tone etc. In games we are able to make artistic choices such as this and even wider—the reality TV approach of just slapping on photorealistic graphics would not be the most fitting for something emotional and cinematic. Camera usage and directing this is a clear part of how the game is presented—how close to the character is the camera and how it behaves and if it is active, when does it pan in or out, etc. are all creative choices that need to fit the whole experience… both from a gameplay perspective but also from a stylistic and aesthetic line of thinking.

Where is the game's soundtrack being recorded, and how were the elements of light and darkness incorporated into it?
We have some very remarkable talent in house that orchestrate the music in Alan Wake. It's such an important part of building a thriller and therefore getting it right is essential. It's not something you can outsource really, as the composer needs to be fully on board with the experience and how to reach the story targets. The music sets the mood and pacing and even the transition from day to night or safe to danger, it's incorporated in all aspects of the game.

When Alan hits writer's block, he heads to Bright Falls with his wife. New sequences show off this small American town during the day … and it's still creepy. What is it about small towns that is so frightening?
We chose a small town Americana setting for Alan Wake because of the creepiness and the familiarity depicted through pop culture TV shows and movies. It's a great setting for a thriller. I don't know what it is about the small American towns, is it just a myth that they all seem beautiful, scenic and happy on the surface with the community co-existing perfectly, but when you scratch the surface they hold deep and dark secrets? Well, in any case, Bright Falls certainly falls in that category.

Were there any specific challenges for a Finnish development team when trying to emulate an American small town?
We have all been brought up in a sea of American and international pop culture—so inspirations from TV, film and books are shared across the world. So, in a way I think there is a common sub consciousness that we share…In this respect it is not terribly hard to draw inspiration and to build on what we and our audience relate to. You know, many of the great Hollywood filmmakers come from all over the world and they are able to build awesome stories situated in America, so I guess there is some analogy in there too.

For realism we have conducted various scouting trips and taken thousands of photographs and hours of video. We have also done extensive background research into the history and environment of the location…so there is a lot of material to draw on too.

Did the team ever travel to … say, Maine? For first-hand research?
No, as the game is located on the West coast we did not go to Maine. But, we've done various trips to the pacific northwest, with multiple teams covering thousands of miles on the road.

It's been four years since Alan Wake was announced. How close are you to the finish line? How much has the game changed since its inception?
The basic concepts and what we set out to do haven't really changed. Quite early on in development we moved from an open world sandbox to a more linear experience, simply to be able to control the mood and atmosphere and deliver a beautiful story, you need that for a thriller. The open world tech which we built is still there though, and allows us to determine wide and long paths which allows the player to explore or choose which method of transport he or she uses to get from one place to another. Other than that I think we've just evolved on our original ideas. It has been a long and exciting journey but we are happy to say the finish line is near and Alan Wake will be available spring 2010.

In America, when we hear small-town writer who's being dragged into his fictional world, we think Stephen King. Yet you've said that Alan Wake—the character—is modeled on a Finnish actor. Who is this mysterious actor? And what about this actor made the team want to terrify him?
Ilkka Villi plays Alan Wake, we wanted to have an actor whom we could work closely with and Ilkka was our first choice for the role. Wake is such a key character, it is important that our writers and team can work with him closely to prepare for stuff like motion capture and facial motion capture as well as source art…

Finally, what is the best horror movie ever made, and why?
I think you will find various opinions on this in the team. I think Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* is a classic that helped to build a genre, *Se7en* is gruesome but has a graceful sorrow to it but I think for me the most meaningful has been *The Shining* directed by Stanley Kubrick, based on Stephen King's novel. Jack Nicholson's performance of a writer is just classic and the film has a handful of epic memorable moments that stay with you … "Here's Johnny," "redrum" being repeated by the child and the line that lives on "All work and no play, make Jack a dull boy"… That film has left an impression.

Alan Wake hits this Spring. Sleep well ... if you can. play

System: Xbox 360, PC **Developer:** Larian Studios **Publisher:** cdv software **Available:** January 5



Divinity II Ego Draconis

A world where man and dragon become one

words Brady Fiechter

Dragons contain a nobility in their evil, a majesty in their destructive mythos. They really are a fantastic being for video game inspiration, a rich centerpiece for the spirited worlds we explore in classical role-playing. The makers of Divinity II: Ego Draconis seem to agree, spinning their tail around the mighty dragon.

The game opens as you expect any RPG would nowadays: pick a female or male character—eventually change your appearance with the help of the castle illusionist—deck them out to your liking, go forth and conquer. Your first mission as a Dragon Knight-in-training is to learn the ropes of the real-time combat and explore a modest village, whose forthcoming destruction will set the tone for the remainder of the warring journey. While infused with the memories of a dragon, eyes turned to silver, your past life is wiped clean from the process, and the story begins.

Divinity II is familiar enough through the eyes of the dragon slayer on foot, whose attributes of vitality, spirit, strength and vigor grow through experience points, feeding new skill sets and varying abilities that depend on your focus as a warrior, wizard or ranger. It's worth mentioning that there is a dose of platforming in your role-playing, asking you to utilize the jumping skills of your slayer as you navigate dungeons and a few other obstacle-infused regions; puzzle solving is also on the menu.

The fresh draw is the ability to eventually transform into a dragon, turning Divinity II into an aerial combat game during which large-scale battles take place across the skies, culminating in regions marked by floating fortresses. The flying bits are completely off rails, and like your human form, as a dragon, your experience in battle allows you to beef up your skill sets for future encounters.

Divinity II's story returns to the land of Rivellon, which teeters on the brink of destruction as the Lord of Chaos unleashes the usual nastiness. Evil lurks, you are its archenemy. In your fight to bring salvation to the land, a neat fortress called the Battle Tower can be captured and made your home base, returned to at any time and populated with allies of all sorts who provide varying degrees of aid: alchemy gardens grow, runners can be sent to gather materials, a necromancer can be called upon to fashion a helper creature through body parts you bring to the tower.

As a Dragon Knight with such arcane powers, the ability to read minds is a nifty by-product of being fused with the spirit of the dragon. Unbeknownst to the inhabitants of the land, you can glean information and manipulate conversations with your unspoken powers. But it'll cost you in gameplay terms: sacrificing experience points opens the path to mindreading. I've yet to go deep enough into Divinity II to fully understand the implications behind this system, but the idea on the surface is certainly an interesting spin on the familiar XP system…

Interview

Swen Vincke, studio head and CEO

play: Obviously the ability to shape-shift into a dragon in Divinity II is a major hook. Was this your intention from the earliest stages of design?
Swen Vincke: Yes, most definitely. The very original idea was a short story about a guy sitting in a tavern with something strange about him, something draconic. Out of that grew the vision of making a RPG in which you could turn yourself into a dragon. And out of that grew years of work trying to making this work within an actual game.

When we spoke last, you joked at how taxing the design process ultimately became.
Our dragon flies at something around 40m/s whereas our knight walks at 6m/s. Making sure that the gameplay works for both was quite a challenge, and we had to iterate a lot before we actually found something that worked, and felt good. I think it's quite rewarding now to fly to a spot and hit the morph button, but it took a long time before we got that right.

Did you study some of the more fantastical, early games of the 3D era where dragons were the theme, like Panzer Dragoon? Obviously the freedom next-generation technology brings is an entirely different monster in a lot of ways.
It's funny that you mention Panzer Dragoon. I bought it while I was in LA for E3, saying to myself that I should check it out, but when I came home I realized it didn't work on European Xbox machines. Other than that, we looked at a lot of games, but nothing really did what we were trying to pull off, so we had to discover a lot of it ourselves.

The flying fortress idea is really neat.
When you play as a dragon, you want to destroy stuff and since you're also pretty powerful, you need to have some danger in there to still have a challenge. That's how we came up with the flying fortresses. We



Play with magic and you get hurt.







I don't think anybody could imagine Divinity 2 without the mindreading.







couldn't make the entire world destructible, but we definitely wanted to have areas where you could blow up a lot of things. I think the idea of making these areas flying fortresses came from seeing an image somewhere posted to a wall.

The dragon hook is also quite different. But I was also pleasantly surprised to discover some pretty hefty platforming mechanics in the game. You don't often engage in this type of gameplay in an action-RPG.
There are two aspects to this. On the one hand, one of my favorite RPGs of all times is Ultima Underworld, which had quite a bit of platforming, so we just needed to have it. On the other hand, it fits with the Divinity formula which continuously tries to offer you different styles of gameplay, to avoid getting you in a grind where you keep on doing the same thing.

The ability to mind read is also quite interesting. What were your larger intentions behind this? Obviously it goes beyond simply toying with XP management.
We wanted to make the dialogues more engaging, getting people to pay attention to what was said in the dialogue rather than just click through it to get the quest, and pondering if they should sacrifice some XP. That way the dialogues became an actual gameplay element.

Conversations occur through dialogue trees.



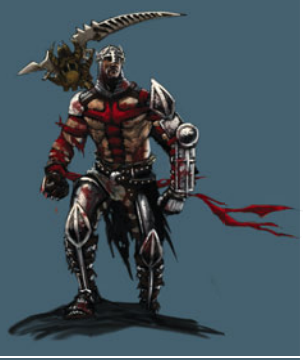
It must have been a daunting design process. Did you ever consider abandoning it?
It was definitely a challenge, because in order for it to work, it had to be present in nearly every single dialogue in the game, so it required quite some effort. On the other hand, it was definitely worth it, and after seeing the first few quests with mindreading implemented, I don't think anybody could imagine Divinity 2 without the mindreading.

I know this is a passion project for you. What else about the game have you been focusing on, find unique, that maybe hasn't really been talked about much to this point.
I think the most important thing about Divinity is we wanted to make a RPG that's fun and accessible, in which you instantly feel at home, and which gives you a sense of growing in power.

You're definitely doing something a little different here. I recall your quote from the last game: "We had no clue how people would react to the game and weren't sure that our RPG mix was going to appeal. Then, suddenly we got bombarded with emails and forum reactions from people enjoying the game, and received award after award from the specialized press." Do you feel that same trepidation? Console audiences can be very demanding!
Oh yes. I've seen sufficient people play Divinity 2 to know that you can have quite a lot of fun with it, but as we are serving a cocktail that's a bit different from the typical one, I hope enough people will find the time to give it a try.

It's a post-WoW/MMO surge world. I see a lot of RPGs lately that have adopted MMO-style questing, MMO-style persistence online, a new focus on party and co-op play. Any cues taken from online RPGs for Divinity 2's questing and social systems?
While I think Divinity 2 introduces a lot of innovation, it's also firmly rooted in the hours we wasted playing classic single player RPGs, so no, MMOs didn't have that much of an influence. You know, a lot of MMOs are designed to keep you playing so they try to slow down your progress, whereas we actually want you to progress pretty fast so you can get to the cool stuff like becoming a dragon or controlling your tower, and that makes a big difference from a design point of view. play

Dante's Inferno



Nether Regions in the Netherworld

words Matt Cabral



Upon concluding my demo of Visceral Games' Divine Comedy-inspired Dante's Inferno, I had just one question for Executive Producer Jonathan Knight : "Are you sure you'll receive a Mature rating from the ESRB?" Knight actually thought I was asking if the game would receive an M over a T rating. However, as I explained to him, I was actually wondering if he was worried his game would be slapped with a sales-killing AO (Adults Only). Perhaps I was jumping the gun a bit, but the gameplay and environments that had just stung my senses with sexually-charged creepiness made GTA-San Andreas' "hot coffee" seem more like room-temperature English tea.

Sure, there's no graphic mingling of naughty bits in Dante's trip through the nine circles of Hell, but the sexuality in the Lust level is about as subtle as a porn star's mustache. The first enemies I encountered, Temptresses, were bare breasted females who shot flailing tentacles from their lower torsos. With backs arched and their grotesque appendages tethered to Dante, these lovely ladies can then reel him toward their sadistic swimsuit area. Of course, armed with a scythe, magic-spitting crucifix, and acrobatics that make Kratos' moves look like that of an awkward adolescent, I was able to make quick work of the open-legged wenches. So, as, uh, tempting as the Temptresses were, I never got to experience the wrath of their lethal loins.

After taking on a few more low-level, bare-boobed beasties, I fiddled with some simple puzzles—turn a crank here, pull a lever there—in environments that unabashedly sold the level's theme; phallic columns lined the walls, and swimming sperm decorated the floor. While the erotic architecture got my attention, it was like a G-rated sightseeing tour compared to what came next. Faced with a naked, screen-devouring Cleopatra, I could only take a moment to ogle her assets, before her nipples opened up, and out spilled a bunch of demon babies with bladed appendages. Now, I'd seen these unbaptized bladed-arm babies before in some of the game's earlier netherworld circles, but seeing them march out of a giant teat definitely put them in a whole new light. After fighting off a few waves of these little bastards, Cleopatra packed-up her breast brigade and scurried off, no doubt to prep for a later meeting with Dante.

As Knight pointed out, without any actual intercourse, Dante's Inferno should be a shoe-in for an M rating. I hope he's right, as I'd hate to see the violence, sexuality, or even creepiness toned down a single notch. The title's gameplay is super-fast, action-fueled, and extremely satisfying, but it's the atmosphere and envelope-pushing art design that really separate it from the God of War clones. After experiencing this evocative level, Dante's Inferno has penetrated (sorry, couldn't resist) my 2010 must-play list. play

I'd hate to see the violence, sexuality, or even creepiness toned down a single notch.



Just par for the course here in the Lust circle of Hell.





System: Xbox 360, PS3 **Developer:** Platinum Games **Publisher:** Sega **Available:** January 5



BAYONETTA

Be Witched

words Dave Halverson

There are a few things you should know about Bayonetta right from the start.

Bayonetta is perfect. She moves perfect, she attacks perfect, she controls perfect, and she looks perfect. The game that Platinum Studios has fashioned around her just might be too. There are more than a few shades of Devil May Cry under all that hair, but the execution and especially design are so beyond compare that the end product feels completely original. Sega's biggest and best franchise since Sonic has definitely entered the building.

If ever a game were a labor of love, this is it. Bayonetta isn't merely the star of Bayonetta, the game itself worships her…It frames her, photographs her, and plays her theme song during every brutal exchange. It's as if Kamiya is directing her from somewhere within the game, making sure the camera is there to capture every last drop of her playful nature, immeasurable allure, and incomprehensible power. You feel lucky to be controlling her; like he's placed some precious jewel in your care. It's crystal clear from the outset how much he's grown as a designer as well as how incredibly gifted and close knit and confident Platinum are as a team. You don't make a game like Bayonetta unless you KNOW you're *that* good.

What I didn't know (or expect) is that Bayonetta is not alone. She operates out of a bar called The Gates of Hell, owned and operated by a large, flamboyant, insanely powerful black gentleman from Hell, who goes by the name of Rodin. Bayonetta provides Rodin the Halos from the angels she slays and he sells her weapons, accessories, items and techniques. He also made Bayonetta's guns and provides her with new ones; gratis on occasion--but otherwise, search high and low for Halos. Prices at The Gates of Hell are DMC high. Next we have Rodin's bagman, Enzo, a "Wise Guy" (comprised of equal parts from Joe Pesci's characters in GoodFellas and Lethal Weapon) who handles the driving, and on the side is helping Bayonetta unravel her past. All we know for sure is that she woke up in a casket at the bottom of lake 20 years ago with no memory of her past, and has to battle angels to stay out of hell. Lucky for us, the answers start finding her from the outset because "action" doesn't even begin to describe what it's like wielding Bayonetta--the more Techniques you add the more ferocious (and fun to watch, grab the Breakdance technique first) she becomes, and tactically she's practically bottomless.

You may also be surprised to learn that under those salacious looks lies the heart of a refined,



Evasive maneuvers: Dodge at the precise moment and time is on your side.





playful, intelligent witch, with a British accent no less. She concocts lollipops for healing, energy, and magic, and enjoys a bit of light reading when she's not butchering angels. Enzo and Rodin seem entirely out of place in contrast, until you realize that the contrast is what makes it work. I've become so programmed to expect the stereotypical it took me a few minutes to realize that Platinum had ditched them entirely.

I don't know what lies ahead, or where this all goes, but based on the first few hours of Bayonetta, I'm definitely playing the best pure action game on the planet and almost assuredly the most beautiful. There's simply no other way to put it. No character has ever moved or fought like this in environments like this against enemies like this. And even if they had, I'm pretty sure they didn't have giant revolvers on their ankles and a skin tight layer of hair from hell that manifests itself as giant flesh devouring monsters. play





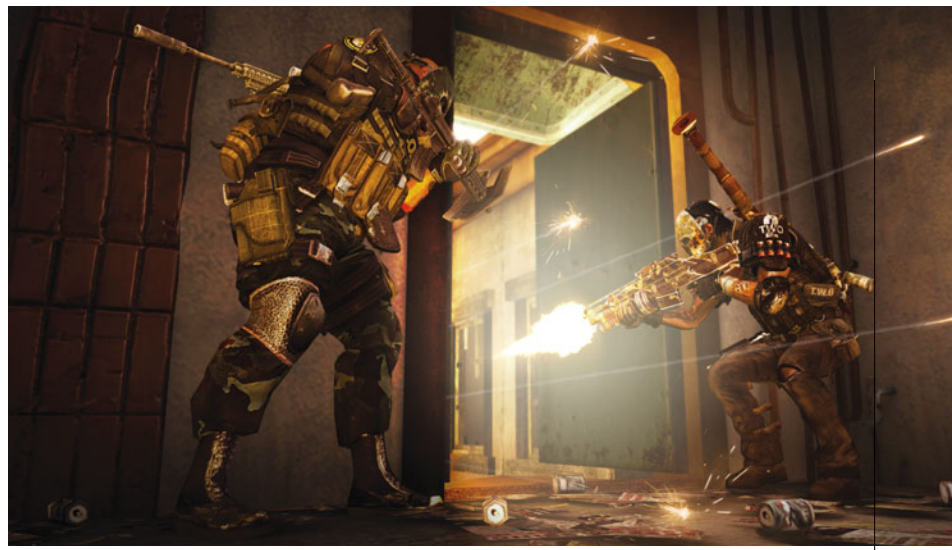


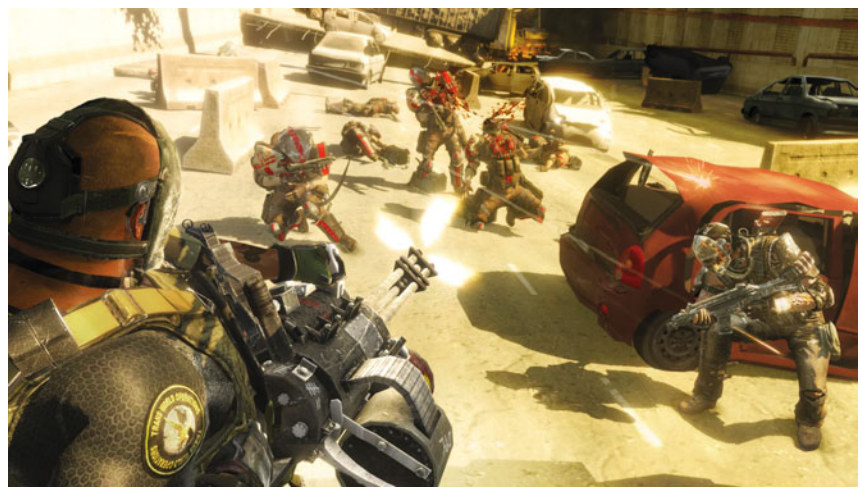




Bayonetta is perfect. She moves perfect, she attacks perfect, she controls perfect, and she looks perfect.

System: PS3, X360, PSP **Developer:** EA Montreal **Publisher:** Electronic Arts **Available:** January 12, 2010







Army of Two: The 40th day

Two goes to the zoo

words Matt Cabral

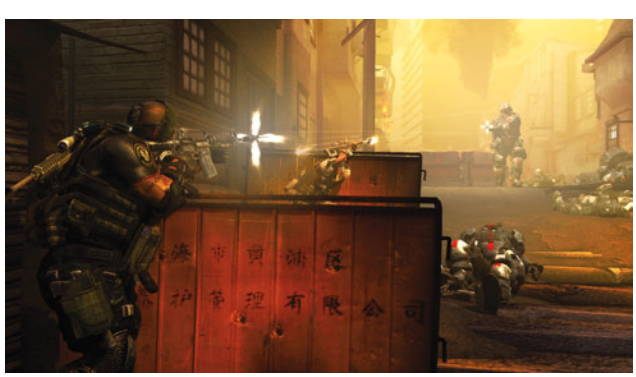
Even if you've only played a handful of shooters, you've likely seen many of the same environments repeated—the abandoned warehouse, war-torn village, bombed-out urban street. So, at a recent demo of Army of Two: The 40th Day, I was delighted to see the series' masked mercenaries, Salem and Rios, take a trip to the zoo. Sure, you could argue that Halo 3: ODST recently took us to a New Mombasa wildlife sanctuary. However, the only animals roaming that level were UNSC Warthogs. AoT's Singapore zoo actually has real animals. Okay, so they're dead animals, but I can't remember the last game that let me take cover behind a rotting rhinoceros corpse. It's a small touch, but one that makes the environments feel more fresh than formulaic. Additionally, EA Montreal promises the final game will inject some dark humor by having audio-driven interactive exhibits. So, maybe while you and your gun-toting partner are fending off waves of evil-doers, you'll be treated to a little history on the African Elephants' mating rituals or the like.

Battling my way through the rhino habitat was just the beginning; once I realized this was no ordinary day at the zoo, I began to appreciate AoT's other defining features. Utilizing the title's trademark co-op mechanics, myself and creative director Alex Hutchinson were able to secure a valuable weapons cache from a band of baddies. Hutchinson snuck up on the head goon, took him hostage, and I followed his lead, tying up the rest of his crew. With loot collected, I was treated to the game's robust weapon customization system. Accessing a menu containing a stockpile of gun parts—including the ones we'd just confiscated—I was able to fashion any number of unique firearms. Stocks, scopes, grenade launchers, muzzles, silencers, and bayonets can be mixed and matched to make weapons that not only differ in appearance but also in their functionality. They can also be pimped with all kinds of slick skins; given our current location, it seemed only appropriate to paint my scoped rifle—complete with screwdriver bayonet—with tiger stripes.

I can't remember the last game that let me take cover behind a rotting rhinoceros corpse.

As much as I would have enjoyed also assembling a leopard spotted bazooka, it was time to get back to business. A fresh group of enemies, lead by a big bruiser with a grenade-tossing addiction, began filing through the animal carcasses. The explosives-chucking boss, while a challenge to take down, provided another opportunity to highlight the importance of teamwork. While Hutchinson took out the less threatening foes, and distracted their leader, I was able to focus on the grenade satchels attached to his belt. With a few well-placed sniper shots, the madman lit up like a Roman candle tossed into a bonfire.

Just experiencing this single level, I was able to see the strides this sequel has made over its predecessor. Varied level design, co-op play that's more organic than forced, and addictive weapon customization—I never did get to see what kind of dirty damage my screwdriver bayonet could do—should keep AoT on top as the premier dedicated co-op experience. play



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"Wow, they actually pulled it off. The lofty goal of representing FPS combat in realistic zero gravity environments has been achieved."

Mike Griffin, play magazine



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Refkex: MX vs ATV

System: PS3, Xbox 360 **Developer:** Rainbow Studios **Publisher:** THQ **ESRB:** E 10+ **Available:** Dec. 1





REFLEX:

MX VS ATV

The rhythm of innovation

words Dave Halverson

As gamers, racing is in our blood, just as it's always been in gaming's. Since Pole Position rolled off the assembly line in 1983, no single category has been as constant or significant. We may not see eye to eye on which genre we prefer or what individual sport we favor, but the need for speed is truly universal. Racing games have also been the barometer on which we've measured each passing generation of console. As sure as the sun rises in the east, racing has been and will forever be a mainstay in the world of video games. But what defines a truly great racing experience? And why do we need so many? What drives us to buy more and more, year after year?

From the first scaling sprite, to Mode-7, to polygonal 3D, technology has always been the driving force behind racing games. Innovation is a potent aphrodisiac. But technology alone, no matter how advanced, doesn't make a great racer. After playing Daytona in the arcades until we head "Rolling Start!" in our sleep, we still couldn't wait to play it at home, even though a third of it popped into view. What made Daytona great was that old Sega Arcade feel—a combination of graphics, control and music. Music has always been a driving force in gaming, but more so in racing than any other category. Music was a big part of what made games like Daytona and Ridge Racer so popular in the arcades and became even more vital after they followed us home. Techno defined WipEout as much as WipEout defined Techno. I didn't know who Prodigy or BT was before WipEout. But the truth is, a great racing experience isn't defined by technology or music…It's defined by rhythm. Before sophisticated physics came along, the right music (rhythm) heightened the experience, but with the advent of great physics that rhythm has been built right into the games. When great physics meet great design, magic happens. But now that we've had our pristine physics, bigger than life graphics and digital sound for a while, where do we go from here? Games with hooks like Burnout, or Midnight Club? Deep simulations like Forza and Gran Turismo? Sure, why not? But what about the good old fashioned 3 to 5 lap adrenaline rush? And haven't those games pretty much run their course? After Forza 3, I can't imagine needing another car racing game until the Microsoft pulls off a 720.

What we really need is innovation, but where will it come from? What more can modern consoles do? The answer is Reflex. The only the catch is that you're gonna have to get dirty.

Motocross is all about rhythm, but it's a

very different animal than auto racing. Where a great car racing simulation on today's hardware is comparable to the real thing, capturing the feeling you get in the pit of your stomach from the second the gate drops funneling into the first turn with 20+ other riders, is far more difficult. Driving is also purely a left/right affair, but MX pits you against the terrain as well as the competition with a style and verticality that makes it extremely rhythmic, but difficult to reproduce. Not so long ago things were pretty grim. While the rest of the world was enjoying Ridge Racer on PlayStation, MX fans were choking on Championship Motocross (32X), and things didn't fare much better on PlayStation. VMX Racing was somewhat impressive for the time (although it sounded like a two-stroke stuck in second gear) and 989's SuperCross Circuit had a cool behind-the-bars cam, but otherwise things were darkest during 3D's dawn. It wasn't until 2001 that motocross on home console--albeit of the 4-wheeled variety—saw real innovation, when a company by the name of Rainbow Studios

Rainbow didn't just change the way racing games look and feel, they've changed the way they play!

introduced ATV Offroad Fury for the PS2. Fury wasn't just better than everything that had come before it; it was one of those too good to be true moments, like Super Mario 64 or Symphony of the Night. Things have definitely gotten better since, but going on 9 years later, true innovation has eluded racing games, but none so much as motocross…until now.

Chances are you've heard about terrain deformation or perhaps even experienced it… or at least thought you had. I know I did, until I played Reflex. Leaving real-time embedded tread marks behind is one thing, but actually altering the terrain is another. And there's nothing subtle about it. In Freeride you can dig a hole deep enough to ride into; ride a few miles and come back—it'll still be there. It's as if they backed up a truck and poured a thick layer of topsoil into the screen. It's truly remarkable, and not just as a conversation piece. Depending on the specific terrain, there's an equivalent density, so your bike handles differently going from grass, to soil, sand, snow, mud, etc. On the track conditions change as a given race or moto wears on. A smooth turn on lap one might be a craggy mess by race's end, and thick sand or mud gets all the more treacherous as it's plowed through. But the innovation doesn't end there. Rainbow didn't just change the way racing games look and feel, they've changed the way they play! In the past even the best motocross games suffered from



With Reflex's new dual control the sky's the limit.

limited rider animation and conventional racing control, but in Reflex the bike and rider control independently with the left analog controlling the bike and the right the rider, putting the player in complete control of every aspect of the race. It also eliminates preloading—the charge and release method commonly used to propel your bike over a series of jumps in lieu of proper rider mechanics. Now that you can shift the rider's weight forward and back, it's a simple a matter of pulling back on the bars. You can say goodbye to incidental crashes too; as long as your reflexes are up to it. Just before you're about to eat dirt after a rough landing, minor collision or what have you, a green arrow flashes indicating the direction your body needs to shift to recover, a simple flick and you're back in business. The AI gets you back on the track quickly in the event you do get hammered—and you will, I don't care what they say some of these AI riders are nuts—but saving a wreck can still be the difference between ogling the sexy trophy girls and a do over.

By themselves the terrain deformation and separate rider control are significant milestones in offroad racing, but combined they're nothing short of genre redefining. They don't have as significant an effect behind the wheel as they do on Quads and MX Bikes, but Reflex is predominantly a motocross game, with National, Freestyle, and Supercross Series. Not to take anything away from the games 4-wheeled thunder. UTV, Sport Truck, and Sport Buggy all









benefit from the amazing terrain effects and dual analog control, and your budding Motocareer takes you through Waypoint, Omnicross, an all new challenge-filled Freeride, and Champion Sport Track, in addition to the MX/ Quad venues.

Though its innovations would be more than enough to retire your copy of Untamed or Unleashed, Reflex isn't just about new technology. Visually it's twice the game, with more spectators; more authenticity in the starting area, infield, and pits; far better foliage and textures, and attention to detail that goes above and beyond considering the leaps it takes. Even the trophy girls look good. Like all of Rainbow's games however, it's about the sights, sounds and especially the thrill of motocross racing first, which just so happens to be all about rhythm. A great motocross course, and these are the best there have ever been, is designed in such a way that underneath what appears to be a sadistically arranged series of obstacles designed to bring you pain lies a series of lovingly arranged opportunities designed to launch you smoothly over the next and make you feel really, really happy. And isn't that what video games are all about?

parting shot

It's finally here. Big-time motocross and off-road racing with REAL dirt and separate bike and rider control... Rainbow Studios deliver a pot of pure gold.

TRACKSIDE WITH LEAD TECHNICAL DESIGNER ELLIOT OLSEN

All the dirt worth digging up on off-road racing's most advanced game ever.

play: ATV Offroad Fury was a milestone for me as a racing game fan, and while visual fidelity and deeper gameplay have made each passing game better, Reflex strikes me as the first truly innovative off-road racer since, due to the true deformation and separate rider bike controls. Beginning with the deformation, we've all seen residual tread textures, but in Reflex every groove has actual collision, meaning the entire game has a kind of living topsoil…it's truly remarkable. How did you achieve this? Is it 100% proprietary?
Elliott Olson – I'll answer the 2nd question first, yes it is 100% proprietary which leads me to answer the first: we can't say. Seriously though, we leveraged some technology we had prior on top of new tech to make what we have now. All things engine-related were built from the ground up and completely new. New physics, new terrain, etc, we are extremely proud that we were able to pull this off. We didn't want this to be smoke and mirrors, but the real deal. That's why it is fast, and that's why it affects you and stays around while you are in the level.

Was it more or less difficult to achieve on either console specifically?
As many know both consoles work and process in different ways. They each had their challenges but we are very proud that they are in fact the same on both. A lot of times when introducing new tech like this you get it to work on one and then not the other, causing you to make concessions on one of them. This was not the case. We were able to do what we set out to do for both.

The complexity on the whole is mind boggling… You can do doughnuts on the edge of a lake and carve out a row of pools… That's some crazy tech, especially considering all the other details such as the individual roosts, extensive rider/bike animation, wind blowing up under the jerseys, spectators, etc. How costly or memory intensive is it?
Like every other game, we are using what the box has to offer to its fullest. It is always a challenge to balance everything and have the game run like it is supposed to. Fortunately we have some very talented people that know how to get every last drop out of the box. As for how costly or intensive it is, we are close to the limit, we didn't leave anything on the table I guess.

Speaking of rider animation, Reflex's is as accurate, natural and all together user-defined as I've seen it (love the tear-off animations). Have you ever considered incorporating various pro's signature styles, or is too costly in the overall scheme of things?
I will say that you have to commend our animation department. It's not like a basketball game or skateboarding where you can do mocap in a small studio. These are fast, fire breathing machines; most of our stuff is done by hand to mimic the best styles for what is needed. I guess







Deformation information:
Dig this hole I dug...as long as I ride here, my giant snow zit stays put!





...we are extremely proud that we were able to pull this off. We didn't want this to be smoke and mirrors, but the real deal.



that is the cool part, being that offroad is such an individual and stylistic sport. Everyone has their own styles, so for now we just try to pull in the best ones.

Switching to the rider control, using the right-analog to control vertical and horizontal pitch literally changes the way MX games are played—for the better of course. How difficult was it to implement? Had you considered it before?
I wouldn't say difficult is right, more actually scary. Any time you set out to change how a game is intended to be controlled and engrained in the minds of people that play these types of games can be scary. On top of that we already knew that we were redoing the physics engine. So the commitment had to be up front and there really was no going back. We were able to roughly prototype the idea to know that this was correct and the way these games aren't meant to be played. Having people that actually ride and race here at the studio helps too and the idea of what this new control meant was enough to make us confident in introducing it to the series and the genre.

The saves are great too, although compared to earlier versions someone really has to tag you to result in a crash. How big of a task is AI tweaking in a game like Reflex, given the amount of vehicle types that interact simultaneously?
The challenge actually lies in how organic the game is now. Our goal has always been to mimic human play. Now with deformation and a host of other things like the new controls, the challenge was to keep that intact. We think we were able to do that and when you do wreck or get taken out now, it probably makes a lot more sense than in games past.

Going back to play Untamed for comparison, the difference is surprising; Reflex is just a whole new level. Beyond sheer tech, refinements abound elsewhere too, most notably in the starting area and start gate, which is way more true-to-life. Is this all due to not having to worry about Wii and PS2 versions?
Well, power does have a lot to do with it, but Untamed was our first jump to the new consoles. With Reflex we had the experience to really show what we can do. I think you are seeing that now. There were things we couldn't do or didn't have time for—with Reflex we made sure to make the game have what an offroad game should.

Come to think of it, you've included female

characters in past games. Why no girl power in Reflex?
Actually, although you can't make your rider a female, you will be racing a few of the top pro women. We always pack our game with as much as we can, but we also have to pick certain things. For this go around it wasn't in the cards.

Unleashed and Untamed introduced various autos to the mix, and while I really dig the occasional UTV race, I'd personally rather see a longer deeper racing season, further tech/detail advancements, or lifestyle implementation than trucks and buggy's. It's a lot to stuff into one game too. Do you feel that the other vehicles open the game up to more users?

Play time: What a great motocross writer!











Our goal has always been to mimic human play.

Yes, the game could stand on its own with just bikes and ATVs, but having the other vehicles in the game gives you that much more to do or experience. We pride ourselves on letting you do many things. Plus, who says running down bikes in a 600-hp truck isn't fun from time to time? If you look at the lifestyle, they are all a big family and interrelated. You have ex-pro motocrossers now racing off-road trucks. Usually if it is dirty and offroad, the racers will race anything that goes fast.

When I got started motocross hadn't penetrated the US and was very much a European sport. Our heroes were Husqvarna's Roger DeCoster and Joel Robert until Brad Lackey came along on his CZ; the sole American who could actually compete on their level. MX has such a rich history. Have you ever discussed a retro class? It would be so cool to race on those hilly European courses on old Bultaco's, Husqies and the like…
It would be cool to have, and there definitely used to be some legendary battles from back then. As with anything, it would have to be right to do it justice, so if anyone would be able to pull that off it would be us. I'll have to get back to you on that one.

You went with Highlights over comprehensive replays. Are they too costly in the scheme of things or does the new tech just make them that much trickier?
It's always a tough one—in the end the visuals, physics, and deformation won out. It isn't that it is trickier, more just balancing memory and showing exactly what it should be.

Gear-wise, Reflex is loaded, and I love the fantasy bikes over the usual Suzuki, Honda, and Kawasaki… But you do have KTM in here. Are they the official bike of Reflex? …(Get me a deal on a Duke?)
We always try to be authentic to the sport, what some people don't know is sometimes it doesn't work out. KTM has always been awesome to work with and they wanted to be onboard for Reflex, so I'll leave it at that. Oh and about that deal…

As a fan, I have to say, I'm glad it was Rainbow that finally reset the bar. Throughout the Supercross and National circuits I was constantly amazed at what I was playing… That rhythm that great MX games provide was so amplified… You don't stop at technology either. More than ever the course design is simply without compare… Moto448, Sandwick, Pine top…these are dream courses. Not just in layout but in actual terrain. What's your process for designing motocross tracks? You guys must do a lot of riding…
Errr… research! Like I said before, the mix we

have here is critical to the game being what it is. We have people here, myself included, that ride and race on a regular basis. Most of our track designers have either ridden or raced just about everything. This knowledge is key to achieving that feeling. Then you throw on top of that other team members that play all different kinds of games and you really strike a cool balance between play and feel.

I guess Arizona is the place to be… Are there a lot of places to ride out there? Do you have cycle parks or is it more open desert?
all of the above. The cool thing about here is you have about six high caliber tracks to ride at, plus you have a ton of desert riding. And we can ride all year round. If you are into it, it really doesn't get much better than here. You are welcome to come ride anytime.

Was Fort Dodge 2 at all inspired by the old LA Coliseum Supercross track? I always wondered what it would be like riding up and then back into the Coliseum.
I don't know if it really was that specifically. We try to look at things we have done in the past and also things in real life to pull the best things together. Going into the stands is something we have had before and wanted to bring back. It's a really cool feeling to drop back into the stadium.

Final question…Can you apply the same technique to water? Might we see a Splashdown with real wake effects? Or hey… Deadly Creatures 2 with snake trails!
I'll get right on that! play













Dave Halverson
PUBLISHER

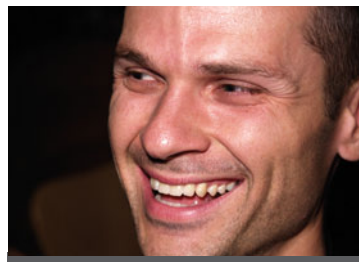
Modus Operandi: Play games in the genres I know and love to their conclusion and then rate them on how well, or not, they deliver relative to the system, genre, and target audience. Then play more Brutal Legend.
Brain Drain: Although it's obviously in its early stages the fact that Sony is even uttering the word hologram is the beginning of the possible fulfillment of my lifelong dream of a hologrphic game system. Sony R&D 4-Ever.
Game of the Month: I knew Darksiders was going to be special but I never expected such a polished altogether masterful adventure, and this real-time dirt I'm racing in...it's like a new genre. So make mine a double! Reflex/Darksiders. Like I've been sayin' -THQ is the real deal.





Casey Loe
ASSOCIATE EDITOR

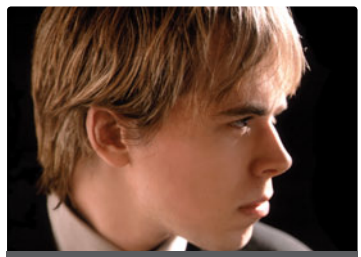
Modus Operandi: I couldn't be happier that we've done away with review scores. It's ridiculous to believe that there's some objective standard of quality that covers the opinions of every person who plays games. That said, I will miss dishing out the 3.5s, because a good reaming just isn't the same without some arbitrarily low score at the end. **Brain Drain:** Buying games used to be so easy... Let's thank EA, Sony, and UbiSoft for transforming it into an infuriating ordeal. Do I buy the special edition based on the presumed quality of "exclusive DLC?" Do I buy it at GameSpot for the exclusive weapon, Amazon for the exclusive level, or GameCrazy for the exclusive multiplayer mode? This is such bullshit. When I pay 60 goddamn dollars for a game, give me all of it.
Game of the Month: Borderlands



Brady Fiechter
EDITOR IN CHIEF

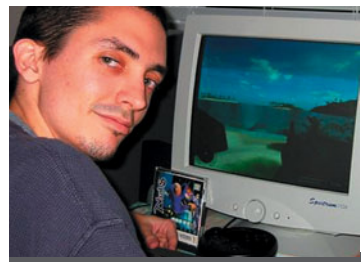
Modus Operandi: There is no checklist for reviewing a game. The best game feels right from the start, and the best game is not concerned with feature sets as much as how each component is handled. If the visual space is not compelling in some way, the gameplay better be so good that it's Tetris (which offers an incredibly interesting visual space).
Brain Drain: I suppose I should appologize for any spoilers in all the Modern Warfare 2 talk. I just assumed the Internet already spoiled The Scene. The Internet makes you do bad things sometimes. I blame the Internet. More importantly, anyone who hasn't already checked this out: symphonyofscience.com. Enjoy.

Game of the Month: Modern Warfare 2



Nick Des Barres
JAPAN EDITOR

Modus Operandi: Hideo Kojima may not agree with me, but I believe video games can be art. Although I have been writing about them for 14 years, never have I felt comfortable assigning numerical scores; there exist no universal, pan-human criteria against one can judge works of art. The most a critic can aspire to is describing, with as much eloquence as he can muster, how the work in question makes him feel. That is my goal when I review a game. **Brain Drain:** Unfortunately Nick contracted the swine flu and couldn't get his Brain Drain in this month. Ok, that's not true. The truth is, Nick is somewhere in the mountains of Japan, screaming at the top of his lungs: "Wake up people, Demon's Souls really is that good!" He is not pleased that a few people in the office are having a hard time accepting Demon's Souls.
Game of the Month: Uncharted 2



Mike Griffin
PC EDITOR

Modus Operandi: I'm looking for convincing themes I can feel and considered polish I can respect, regardless of a game's scope or platform. I absolutely believe that games can be considered art, and a lot of great art requires a technical understanding of the canvas, instruments and stage. That's a balance I care about in a medium whose MO is interactivity. Interface is also very important to me...
Brain Drain: So the analysts say we're stuck with current consoles until about mid-2012. The rollout of new machines from the Big 3 will be delayed thanks to the lingering global recession. Can you imagine how incredible Xbox 360 and PS3 games will look in two years? Can the Wii last that long?

Game of the Month: Left 4 Dead 2



Heather Anne Campbell
EXECUTIVE EDITOR

Modus Operandi: Games are a journey, and should be covered like travel journalism. It's more important to know how a game affects you than to provide a list of options it features on its menu screen. The number of guns, the types of vehicles, the variety of locations—these are bullet points for the back of the box. I'll tell you if it made me feel.
Brain Drain: What makes a game addictive? I think I've figured it out. Games become addictive when they feature novelties that can only be accessed beyond a certain skill threshold. When changes made to your abilities are compounding, and provide you with a larger tool set of mechanics and interaction. It sounds simple, but games are addictive when you keep what you've learned, and can only see new things by getting better. (In addition, the mechanics of the game should be crunchy.) **Game of the Month:** Demon's Souls



Matt Cabral
EIC: Play Online

Modus Operandi: I can appreciate both score and score-less reviews, and believe they can absolutely coexist in our industry. I love to read—and often re-read—a well-written critique within the insightful pages of Play just as much as the next gamer. But sometimes, my Facebook-addicted, YouTube-surfing, iced coffee-swilling side craves the quick-hit satisfaction of a big fat number. Besides, have you ever tried reading a full review on an iPhone while driving? That's why playmagazine.com will host the same great review content from the magazine, with the addition of our classic 1-10 numbered scale. Plus, it gives us a voice on those sales-steering aggregate sites.
Brain Drain: From Metro 2033's Twitter feed: "We're 100% focused on single player, which will be a pretty long experience - no multiplayer sorry!" Finally, a developer willing to risk publisher and player scorn by forgoing a tacked-on multiplayer mode in favor of a polished solo experience. There is a God!

Game of the Month: Borderlands



Eric L. Patterson
ASSOCIATE EDITOR

Modus Operandi: I come from the angle that games can always be fixed and/or improved in some way, that games should be about making the player happy, not the developer, and if a game is multiplayer, it should be online, period. I'll forgive a game's flaws if it is an enjoyable experience, but I wish the small user-centered details weren't so often overlooked.
Brain Drain: What I want for Christmas: Pocky & Rocky on the Virtual Console, Ridge Racers 2 PSP as a digital download here in the States, Disaster Report 3 to get an English translation, Phantasy Star Portable 2 to come out over here tomorrow, Persona 3 Portable to come out over here yesterday.
Game of the Month: Phantasy Star 0











Resident Evil
The Darkside Chronicles

Shoot them in the dead!

words Heather Anne Campbell

The Resident Evil: Chronicles series reminds me of those end-of-the season episodes of your favorite television shows. You know the ones—they're season recaps, sometimes with additional scenes or footage. Chronicles does these episodes one better: They shift the game's style, turning our third-person survival horror series into first-person, on-rails shooters.

Now, if you know Resident Evil's backstory, there's not a lot of new stuff here. I mean, there are some new revelations, and a couple surprises (that I've been asked not to reveal by Capcom, even in my review), but most of the game revolves around the plots of Resident Evil 2 and Resident Evil: Code Veronica. There's a couple additional episodes with original material, like one set before the events of Resident Evil 4 starring Leon S. Kennedy and Jack Krauser (rendered in pretty spectacular lighting on the Wii), but for the most part, we're seeing settings that we're familiar with, in a way that we haven't experienced them before.

It's not revolutionary, but it is silly fun.

The best parts of the game are when you're shooting. The worst parts of the game are the lengthy cut-scenes when you have nothing to shoot at. If you strip the game down to its skeleton, it's a handheld-camera-Duck-Hunt, featuring long sequences of no ducks.

Now, I know that the Resident Evil story is important to a lot of the series' fans. Unfortunately, the game's designers treat the story with a certain indecisiveness, as if torn between reverence and apathy. Given the amount of time that we're *not* fighting zombies, or tounge-headed half-breeds, you'd think that the story really was important to Capcom. But consider this: if you have a cutscene where a police officer is dying on the floor, and you give the player the freedom to shoot their gun at the walls constantly, they will do so, undermining your drama.

Nothing makes a serious scene more ridiculous than constant, random gunfire. If you're going to concede that the player *needs to be able to do something* during the cutscenes, then perhaps the cutscene itself needs to be taken in a different direction. Or if you believe the story to be important, then it must be treated as such, with control wrestled away from the player.

Is the game groundbreaking? No. But it *is* enjoyable, in that mindless, Saturday morning way. It's not revolutionary, but it is silly fun. The new camera is nice, and reminds me of the forced angles of early Resident Evil games, in that it builds tension by limiting our point-of-view. For Resident Evil fans, or fans of arcade shooters, this game is a no-brainer. But for players looking for a frightening few hours, or even a story delivered with single-minded clarity, they'd be better served playing an actual Resident Evil game. play

parting shot

It's a junk-food action-shooter. Bring a friend, buy a pizza, and you'll have a good time. This isn't a game we'll be talking about in a few years, or even in a few months. But hey, not every game needs to be great. Right?

System: Wii **Developer:** Nintendo **Publisher:** Nintendo **ESRB:** E **Available:** November 15, 2009



New Super Mario Bros.

The tragic story of four friends who kept running into each other.

words Heather Anne Campbell

"New Super Mario Bros. Wiii-hiiii!" screams Charles Martinet, and off we launch! NSMB Wii is the second major Mario game for Nintendo's best-selling system, and this time Mario is packaged as a four-player co-op side-scrolling platformer that recalls the 8- and 16-bit games of our actual or imagined youths. This is not a mini-game collection, nor is the title dependent on wacky control schemes and IR sensors. Hold the remote sideways in your hands, press 2 to jump, and away you go on a long, classic Wii title. It's the Mario we've been asking for, for years.

And since Nintendo knows that we've been waiting for this game for so long, they let us all play at once! Players one and two are Mario and Luigi, three and four get two generic Toad characters (why not new, original characters for three and four? Or Toad and Birdo? Only Nintendo knows). Hitting question blocks with four players on-screen means four power-ups, and what delicious power-ups there are! An ice-flower turns enemies into frozen blocks, which can used as platforms, or picked up and thrown like turtle shells. And ice floats, too! The new Penguin Suit lets Mario and friends slide on their bellies, and also lets them throw ice, like all natural penguins. The Koopa Kids have returned, and each themed world (Sand, Jungle, Water, Etc), features a mid-boss and a final boss.

Having trouble? No worries! New Super Mario Bros. Wii features the much-discussed auto-play feature, and here's how it works: After eight sequential deaths, a green block appears on screen accompanied by a doorbell sound, which gives you the choice to let Luigi play through a level on auto-pilot. You can take him over at any time, and finish the level on your own, or you can watch as he *slowly* and *patiently* dispatches enemies and hops over tricky sections of the map.

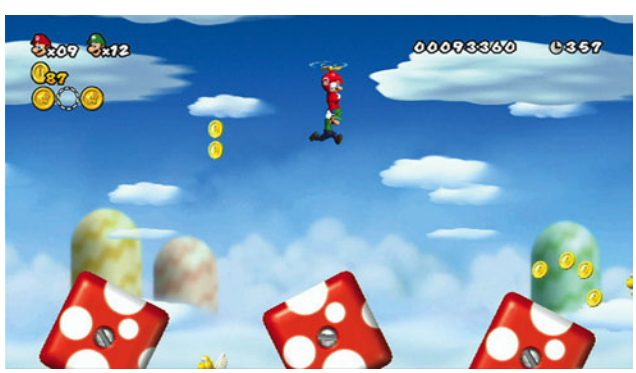
Furthermore, the co-op game is made for players of multiple skill levels, and any gamer (in a multiplayer game) can opt-out of a difficult section by pressing the A button -- which traps their character in an invincible bubble. Less experienced players can skip sections of the game this way, but are at the mercy of their fellow players when it comes to reactivation, as a bubbled player can not un-bubble themselves.

New play modes. New suits. And new levels. So why doesn't New Super Mario Bros. Wii seem to work? Why doesn't it grab me and press me into its loving service? Why am I not hungry to play it again and again and again?
Here are the big three reasons:

1. The music is not good.
Only Megaman relies more on its catchy themes than Mario, and this Mario game has forgettable, poorly orchestrated melodies. The best parts of the music are hooks from old games. The worst parts are everything else. I have used the world map music from Super Mario Bros. 3 as my cellphone ring. Nobody would chose the theme of NSMBW's 3-1 as their music for anything.

2. Though the level design is sometimes excellent, its palette is not.
The background and foreground blend together, confusing the action. Old Mario games (from which this game draws) featured nearly blank backdrops–or in

After eight deaths, a green block appears on screen, accompanied by a doorbell sound, which gives you the choice to let Luigi play through a level on auto-pilot.





the case of Super Mario World, a deep perspective with smartly chosen colors.

Finally, and most importantly:

3. Platforming is deliberate business. You cannot combine the chaos of multiplayer with pixel-specific jumps. Even with constant communication, the game devolves into one person working through a difficult section while the others are trapped in invincible bubbles.

To be frank, the game is not hard. It has an average difficulty. I'm pleased to write that Nintendo has not dumbed down the game for its new target audience.

The problem is, the game *becomes* hard when you play with friends. Each player has a physical presence on the screen—a body —and collision with a fellow player sends both characters off on random trajectories. Sometimes this can be exploited for gain, but often it is simply a nuisance, as the levels can not be designed to incorporate the chaos of multiple players. The effect is frustrating. New Super Mario Bros. Wii doesn't bring people closer together; it drives them farther apart. It seems designed











There are many aspects to this multiplayer madness.

to encourage antagonism, evidenced not only by the action of mutliplayer games, but by the fact that the total death of a player turns their Wiimote into a horn.

When your friend dies, he or she can just honk incessantly. Is this the choice of a team that wants to encourage cooperation? Why not give players a pointer, like Zack and Wiki provides? Instead, Nintendo gives your friends a noise-maker, and asks them to stand around during a party. What is your friend going to do? Make noise.

Not all the sounds in the game are grating. In particular is the sound Mario makes when he gets a Penguin Suit. A funny, covered horn announces the arrival of the awkward-looking power-up with a «Wah-woh-woh!» Great. Love it. I could hop in and out of penguin suits all day. Like the record-scratch of Yoshi, the Penguin Suit has the quirky idiocy of old Mario games.

The specific joy of the Penguin Suit sound is worth mentioning because Mario (like all games, I guess) is made of specifics. Mario's quality is not found not only in its level design, but in the games' well-tested musical licks and bright, candy colors. We like Mario because of the momentum of his jumps, and the way the developers laid out Super Mario Bros.' 1-1 so perfectly, teaching us the language of the entire game. That's why this new Mario doesn't quite pop; the music isn't quite there, the colors are a little off, and the levels' layout can only be truly enjoyed solo—and that's not how this game is designed to be played. A valiant effort, but it's not a home-run. play

parting shot

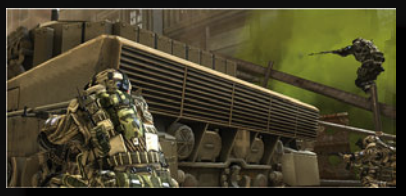
Can a game be worth purchasing without being brilliant? It depends on your wallet. The first few hours of multiplayer are going to be worth the sticker price, but the rest of the game is nearly inaccessible for four simultaneous gamers.


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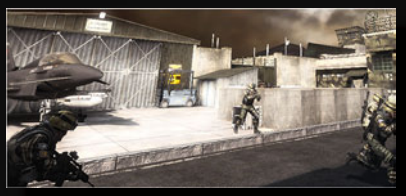
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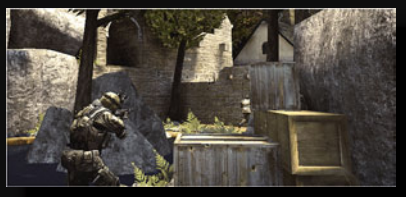
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System: PS3, Xbox 360, PC **Developer:** Infinity Ward **Publisher:** Activision **ESRB:** M **Available:** November 9







MODERN WARFARE 2

Shock and awe

words Brady Fiechter

I can't tell you the last time I took this many notes while playing a game. I'm flipping through page after page as I write this, reminded of my original intentions to discuss my experience with Modern Warfare 2: throw away the notes and just discuss the implications of the unsettling scene in the airport that drops you into a mass slaughtering of innocent bystanders. The first time I went through this obstacle course of cold-blooded murder, I was a little shaken up. The true power of the interactive medium revealed itself; games can be much more than innocent fun, and this is only the beginning. I want more. I want to be challenged and tested and moved by games, like I was here.

But enough about that. Let's get back to the notes and beyond the airport scene, leaving a larger discussion for another day. At the top of the first page, scribbled as the credits were rolling: "Modern Warfare 2 was an awesome experience, an awesome game, and an awesome achievement in the continuing attempt to blend the craft of gamemaking with the craft of cinema." As a big fan of the first game, I expected something great, but I honestly thought the startling newness of Modern Warfare would leave expectations too high to match. It speaks volumes that Modern Warfare 2 was an even more satisfying, more intense experience—the visual design is slightly more impressive in moments, but it's the improved gameplay ideas and level design that are that much better and really matter in the end. It's the second time through that I really began to appreciate what Infinity Ward had accomplished, as I further tuned in to the game's machinations.

Modern Warfare 2 is in many ways more of the same. The cynical player may indeed have expectations too high and walk away impressed but wanting more. I get that. The game largely recycles fundamentals: follow very direct, very linear commands through a very direct, slightly rigid space demanding that you stay on a course while chaos rains down all around you. Is the central AI of the enemy much better? Hard to say. What most impresses is how the resistance

I want to be challenged and tested and moved by games, like I was here.



Come get some.











is established in the scene, as much fantastic set dressing as engaging shooting gallery.

Infinity Ward has a flair for the dramatic. I have friends far more hardcore than I with their competitive shooter natures, who get the demanding subtleties of pure gameplay moments, while I tend to be just as interested in how those moments play out on the persistently directed stage. Modern Warfare 2 peerlessly builds wonder and chaos and spectacle into its battlefield, yet the building blocks that organically shape the engaging combat rise from this incredible visual space. Getting pinned down underneath latticed rooftops in Rio De Jeneiro, darting around shattered columns in an underground prison in Russia, trapped in a casing of fog as thermal sites reveal deadly targets on an oil rig in the Arctic—the game plays out in sequences with weight and narrative force.

I see that I have written in my notes that Modern Warfare 2's most enjoyable level takes place in what could be any small-scale city in America, where war has arrived on our home turf and brought the fear of God into America the indestructible. You fight through a self-contained area built out of a bank, a taco shop, a bar and grill and a few other eerily familiar suburban signposts. Chipping your way from one spot to the next, back and forth, the destruction building and intensity rising. If this weren't the game's defining scene for me, I'll leave it to the battle that goes into the housing district to follow, where you eventually make your way into the upstairs panic room of a mansion estate.

This series turns some people off with the the idea that the fighting is too linear and scripted; I say the point is lost—that you have this little space, more convincing than any game before it, that would leak its apoplectic charge if designed with an unnecessary, forced freedom. Some of these levels are rigid, yes, but it's the balance Infinity Ward tips from quiet moments, to skull-shattering mass battles, to expansive, more chess-like spaces that make you feel like you are in an actual place with real choice and real consequence.

The sense of scale and contrast is epic. Hell, there is even a moment that goes into the eyes of an astronaut, then back into the eyes of a soldier who will likely find his brains splattered before the battle spills into a third-world street; this game does not shy away from brief moments of gore, punching you in the gut without dwelling on the violence. I've played more first-person shooters than I can count, and while Modern Warfare 2 is not the most original in the collection, it is the most affecting.

I'll let others declare Modern Warfare 2 as the best game of the year, and leave my words to call it the most complete package of the year for what I'm gunning for. I don't play competitive multiplayer, but there is something about this game's use of role-playing devices that takes the spot-on design of the single-player look and feel and engages me in new ways online. The little burst of hit points, the reward of a growing character, the projection of my ability onto stats and personal achievements in the match are addictive and pure gaming fun. Special Ops, which puts you and a friend into recycled single-player levels and a scattering of cutting-room floor levels, is a substantial game in itself. But value and longevity be damned, it's the emotional impact Modern Warfare 2 brings to the table that in the end deserves the highest of praise. play

This guy is asking for the brutal melee attack.

parting shot

About that last thing I want to play is a game based on the military these days, but Infinity Wards high-level sense of design and moments of awe and wonder make it all better. Awesome game.

Modern Warfare 2 peerlessly builds wonder and chaos and spectacle into its battlefield.

System: PS3, PC, 360 **Developer:** Gearbox **Publisher:** 2K Games **ESRB:** M **Available:** Now

Borderlands

Just as much fun for lone post-apocalyptic world travelers

words Matt Cabral

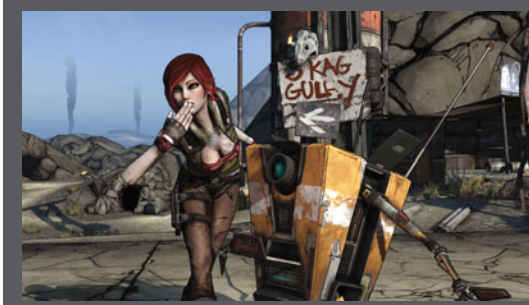
2K's marketing team has been hammering us over the head for quite some time now about Borderlands' 4-player co-op feature. As a gamer who just can't seem to embrace the whole multiplayer—competitive or co-operative—phenomenon, this made me more than a little nervous. Aside from all the co-op buzz, though, I found Gearbox's cel-shaded post-apocalyptic looting-and-leveling shooter very appealing.

Thankfully, my concerns were squashed as swiftly as a weak warrior in the Thunder Dome—Borderlands *is* for solo gamers, too. And, the other bullet points 2K has been beating us with, regarding the game's unique visuals and bottomless weapon selection, are spot-on awesome. There's no question Gearbox made the right decision in delaying their RPS (role-playing shooter) to replace its more realistic visual presentation with a gorgeous graphic-novel-come-to-life look. From the painted deserts to the pop-off-the-screen boss battles, everything is made better by this ambitious art style. Not only will you never mistake Borderlands for Fallout 3 or any of the umpteenth other wasteland-set shooters, but you'll actually begin to wonder how some of your other favorites would benefit from such a makeover—I so want a cel-shaded Halo, now!

Once your eyes adjust to the awesomeness, you'll then begin to appreciate Borderlands' dangerously addictive gameplay. Like similar just-one-more-level experiences, this one will keep you ravenous for that next jolt of XP. But, unlike many such games, I found Borderlands' pacing far more fun than grinding. Both main missions and side quests are worth your effort and ammo. And, to be honest, attempting to just barrel through the primary quest will often leave you face down with a body full of bullets and a mouth packed with dirt. Borderlands is a hard game if you don't properly level your character; in general, I found any enemy two levels or more above me near impossible to take down. But again, given the nature of the extracurricular killing, you wont mind traveling off the beaten path to occasionally beef up your character.

Once your eyes adjust to the awesomeness, you'll then begin to appreciate Borderlands' dangerously addictive gameplay.







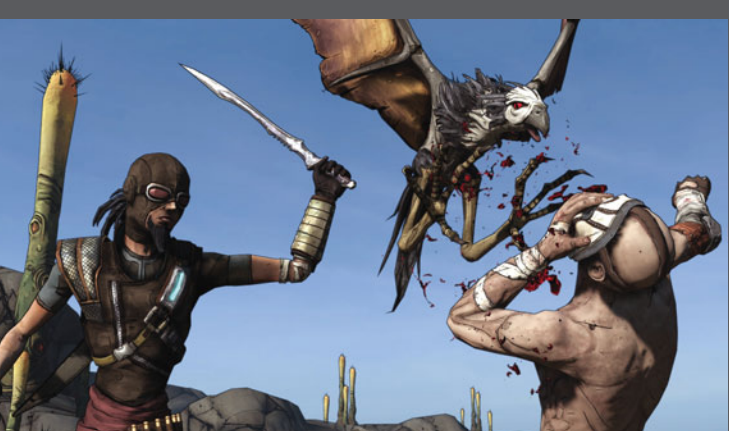


Of course, watching your XP rise like the mercury in a Nevada dessert thermometer only packs half the appeal; the other is the loot. Oh yes, when Gearbox claimed they put one million-plus weapons in their game, they, as it turns out, were not under the influence of some post-apocalyptic moonshine. While I'm pretty certain I didn't even crack the 100 mark, I did have my trigger finger soothed by a brain-bending variety of mutant killers. All your standards are here, tweaked to death with scopes, muzzles, stocks, grenade launchers, etc. However, the real appeal









comes from the creative ammo types; whether you want to melt the faces off your foes with acid-filled rounds or simply set them ablaze with incendiary bullets, Borderlands is happy to satisfy your sadistic side. Want to blow the head off a machete-wielding midget with a rocket propelled from a pistol? Batter up!

Speaking of freeing baddies of their body parts, Borderlands also packs in some fantastic enemy variety. It's a big game, so sure, you'll see many wasteland wanderers repeated several times over or simply imbued with higher hit points, but there's still a dizzying amount of bad guys just waiting to meet the business end of your corrosive-round-propelling arm cannon. And, with the title's just-right level of dark humor, you'll enjoy the frantic fire fights even more. For example, in addition to the aforementioned blade-baring midgets, you'll also deal with little people that prefer the stopping power of a shotgun. However, because these shotgun-toting tinys are barely knee-high to a grasshopper, they literally get knocked on their asses upon firing a shot. It's simultaneously hilarious and strategic, as you buy some time while they attempt to scurry to their feet.

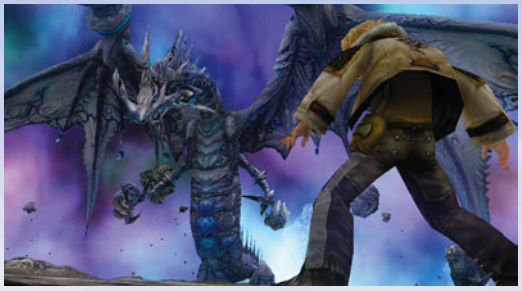
Borderlands' edgy humor also brings me to the title's biggest flaw. Much of the dialog is text-based or static audio and, while it certainly gets the job done, I can't help but wonder how much more personality the game would, if animated characters were actually allowed to speak all their lines. As is, more impatient players will miss out on some great stuff if they simply choose not to read all the text.

Still, this is a small gripe in an otherwise stellar production. In addition to everything I've already touched on, Borderlands also contains some great vehicle combat, a large explorable world with nicely varied environments, a day/night cycle—the desert's truly eerie once the sun disappears—and four playable classes, each with a unique upgradable ability. I went with the soldier, not so much because he was the most well-rounded wasteland warrior, but because he can deploy a shielded turret; it's endless fun to hunker down behind it and watch it tear your enemies to ribbons. Other classes have equally interesting powers, such as the Hunter's Bloodwing, a bird which rains down death from the skies, or the Siren's stealthy Phase Walk. Couple the different playable desert dwellers with the temptation of unearthing that next creative killer (only 999, 900 to go), and I just realized it's time to jump in for a second playthrough. play

parting shot

Despite the pre-release co-op hype, this one's just as entertaining for solo apocalypse survivors. While I wish more dialog was delivered through animated characters, it's hard not to be taken in by the rest of what this ambitious shooter has to offer—great visual presentation, addictive leveling and looting, frenzied gunplay, four playable classes. Oh, and Mutant Midget Psychos.

System: Wii **Developer:** Square Enix **Publisher:** Square Enix **ESRB:** Teen **Available:** December 26



Final Fantasy Crystal Chronicles: The Crystal Bearers

The Crystal Principle

words Dave Halverson

This just in: The Wii has untold untapped power. Not as in patchy areas of simulated effects, but as in the Wii is a force to be reckoned with. Not on the level of the PS3 or 360, but definitely in the neighborhood. Why are we just seeing it now? Either it costs a fortune to actually tap into, or the developers of 90 percent of what's out there lost the manual. Or I suppose it could just be that old Square/Nintendo magic (now Square Enix/Nintendo magic), which is more likely. Because if anyone else could do this, I expect they would. Final Fantasy Crystal Chronicles: The Crystal Bearers is the best looking game on Wii by such a wide margin I'd swear it were on a different system if I hadn't just spent the last 25-30 hours living telekinetically through my trusty rubber encased Wii Remote and Nunchuk. And not only does Crystal Bearers look like a million dollars—well, about 30-40 million dollars actually—but beyond the sensuous technology it houses some of the most peculiar and altogether wonderful character and game design you're bound to find anywhere. All thanks to Toshiyuki Itahana, whom I now have to thank for yet another irresistible female Selkie as well Garnet Til Alexandros. Thank you Mr. Itahana!

Not that Layle isn't all that and a giant Chocobo. Of all the Final Fantasy heroes (although he's so apathetic, "hero" really doesn't fit) he's the best so far, seeing as how Cloud is no longer really Cloud. In fact all of the characters in Crystal Bearers are great; Layle's young Axl Rose lookalike partner Keiss, Princess Althea, Cid, High Commander Jegran (best villain ever), Amidatelion (aka Goldenrod) Vaigali, and of course Belle, without whom the game wouldn't be quite so special. There's a whole mess of great supporting characters too, some of which heed your way, like the attentive little Lilty Clerk at the Central Platform that curtsies ever so delicately every time the shuttle pulls away, and of course many a Moogle. Moogle Shops buy



One minute you're fighting evil and the next you're at the beach ogling Selkies in bikinis.







any Materials you come across as well as sell them and Moogle Workshops turn them into accessories that enhance Layle's Attributes. Or you can drop into any Moogle Emblem Shop and for Gil and Materials change the emblem on Layle's Jacket. I went psycho in there.

There's even a mail Moogle who finds you no matter where you are to deliver your mail, and a help Moogle named Stilzkin. Be sure to pick up the latest issue of the UMA News too. You never know what might be happening in the world that you can profit from.

Following the remarkable opening movie in which you get to interact twice—all of the game's cinemas take place in-game to create a seamless world and foster character growth—it's off to the gorgeous, but utterly chaotic, Lilty Capital Gate Hall, where you'll find all kinds of peculiar Lilty folk, all of which you can lasso and toss around (grabbing any Gil that shakes free). As a Crystal bearer Layle is both powerful and a social outcast, although most people, be they Clavat, Selkie, or Lilty, seem more fascinated by him than fearful. As a Bearer, Layle never really touches anything; all of the action is initiated by aiming, grabbing and flicking via telekinetic stream. And you can grab just about anything, from treasure chests full of Gil to Guards to children to see what shakes free. He also uses it to pull out platforms, swing, and every now and then catch a ride…check out the fur when you ride your first Zu by the way…wow. In the field you can either grab and fling the various beasts and demons, or use whatever's lying around to throw at them; the bigger the object the longer it takes to ensnare. Entering each area amidst the game's vast open regions, they'll either be under normal conditions (well, normal by Crystal Bearers' standards) or under a Miasma Stream. Miasma Streams constantly move in and out of a land until Layle can eliminate every demon it deposits and then close it before it subsides, in which case it drops a Myrrh fragment, increasing Layle's Life by 1 point. Depending on the region there might be other conditions too, such as a farmer's cows being sucked into the sky by UFO's and other such whack phenomena. Hence what I love about Crystal Bearers. The central theme is dead serious—dire even, and Layle's right in the middle of it. Yet not only does he remain apathetic, the moment he scurries into the wild the music goes from the usual mesmerizing opus to something that sounds like you stepped into an episode of Hee-Haw. It's one cheesy sonnet after another. One minute you're fighting evil and the next you're at the beach ogling Selkies in bikinis playing a mini game to help Belle win a shoving match. Wherever you go there's some crazy thing to do like fishing (love the fishing) or getting a bird to sit on your head, but it all figures into the equation via materials. Nuts, bottlecaps, Yo-Yos, Four Leaf Clovers…you name it, Moogles will take it off your hands for skills in trade, kupo.

Getting back to the Capital, upon your arrival several huge spherical Plaza Sculptures break loose and bowl over some of the bumbling Royal Guard; bulbous armored Lilty with shielded faces, tiny little legs and large leaves sprouting from their heads. You can stay awhile admiring them, changing the channels on the Crystalvision and tossing things around, but better to head for the Great Clock to get the game going. Boarding the Capital Express Shuttle for the first time, be sure to look out the window in first person (hold z) to take in the sights; there's never been anything like what you'll see to my knowledge, and it really gives you a sense of place. Ultimately you'll be able to take the shuttle from any stop, as well as ride a giant chocobo, but initially Layle makes his way across the vast plains on foot where all that great gameplay and story begins to unfurl, as well as probably the best mini games in existence. All the while a news ticker moves along the bottom of the screen bringing you everything from the local news to breaking stories, usually involving Layle. The story throughout is simply amazing; easy to follow and succinct yet utterly compelling and bursting with surprises. The bosses are something to behold as well and the ending, well, let's just say it doesn't get much better. Not that it signals game-over, but rather to begin anew with all of your Materials, Accessories and Gil, and really finish the game, which you'll be more than happy to do.



parting shot

I haven't felt this way about a Square (Enix) game since the original Crystal Chronicles, which was sooo difficult to play single-player, where Bearers is tailor-made for one. The character and world design is simply magic, the tech beyond belief, and the soundtrack (well, 90% of it at least) the most memorable since FFVII. It's waaaay out there though. In Toshiyuki Itahana I trust. The magic is back!

System: PS2, PSP, Wii (Reviewed) **Developer:** Climax Studios **Publisher:** Konami **ESRB:** M **Available:** Dec 2009



Silent Hill
Shattered Memories

A fan's fragile heart, frozen

words Eric L. Patterson

I review video games; partially because I've been playing games for so long that I have a lot of experience with them, thus hopefully giving me a decent level of knowledge on what makes a good or bad game, and partially because I've conned somebody into paying me for my opinions. What I am not is a game designer; I have never developed a game, I have no true understanding or appreciation for what goes into developing a game, and it is simple for me to sit behind a keyboard and write words tearing down the project that tens (or hundreds) of people spent months, even years, giving their all to. I understand and appreciate this fact, and while I may express thoughts in my reviews on how I think a title could have been a more enjoyable experience from my viewpoint, I try to always remember that talking about game development is a hell of a lot easier than it is actually doing it. Don't think too highly of yourself, Eric; don't assume that you could have done a better job making a game than its developers just because you have opinions.

A fine rule that I can (try to) live by in all cases except one: Silent Hill.

Silent Hill is not a game series to me; it is something far bigger, far more important, something far more personal and heartfelt. My favorite game of all time is a tie between the original Silent Hill and its sequel, Silent Hill 2. I've always said that Silent Hill was the game I would have made if I made games, and I was so frustrated with the overall direction of the series after I played Silent Hill: Homecoming a few months ago that I started putting together a design doc for my own Silent Hill title. (Seriously, Konami–and I'll work for cheap.) I once wrote a text file that was a virtual phone book to the shops and locations in Silent Hill, and every message forum I'm on has my location as being from "Silent Hill." My love for the franchise may be devotion, or it may be obsession, but whatever it is, I care about how it and its mythos are treated probably more than most of the people who have ever had anything to do with it. There is nothing that I want more than for the series to find itself again, returning to the glory that it once had.

That, specifically, was the promise of Silent Hill: Shattered Memories. Or, if promise is too concrete a word, at least the hope and dream. Homecoming left many weary of too much combat (which, I gotta be honest, I came to quite enjoy), as well as eager to see more importance placed back on storyline, puzzles, and exploration (a fabulous idea). Word leaked on the internet of a "remake" of the original Silent Hill, something I had always prayed for but also realized could be a frightening thought. When the truth came out, it wasn't a remake we were in store for, but a "re-imagining," a fresh look at the events of Harry's search for his daughter Cheryl from a team that loved the series and wanted to do it right.

I don't doubt that the people who worked on this project–from the producers to the programmers to the artists to whoever was in charge of making sure there was always a fresh pot of coffee made–went to work every day determined to create a game that would give Silent Hill fans something they had been lacking for a long time: hope. In so many ways, playing Shattered Memories, I understood that; I felt their passion, their dedication, their drive to make an experience that they could be proud of. And for that reason, I sincerely and honestly hate what I'm about to say.

As a Silent Hill game, Shattered Memories completely and utterly fails.





Cybil takes fashion tips from Silent Hill's trend-setting nurse population.

The problem is, [Shattered Memories] is a Silent Hill game... and it's almost as if it completely forgets that fact.

The foundation Shattered Memories was built upon is filled with fantastic concepts, apparent from the moment it loads. The opening video and its menu system? Genius. Your first moments in the game are then spent in a psychiatrist's office, where a certain "Dr. K" will break in from time to time to talk to you–YOU you, as you look on from a first-person viewpoint–about your memories of Harry's trials and tribulations, and what the deeper, underlying meaning to what he encountered really is. It's a fascinating story element, and goes hand-in-hand with the "psychological profile" aspect of the game, where what Harry does through your actions helps shape and change the world around you. A game that plays you while you play it, if you will; some ramifications of this you'll understand, some you won't, but it's the idea of player choice without the player always understanding that he's being given a choice.

Brilliant.

If Shattered Memories was crafted as an original IP, say "White Hell" or "Dead of Winter" or even "Silent Snow," I could look upon it as a compelling and daring new project that was a heck of a first effort in almost every regard save its "action" portions. To rectify complaints of previous Silent Hill titles getting too combat-heavy, Shattered Memories is basically split into two gameplay types: "snowy" Silent Hill with its emphasis on puzzles, exploration, and character interaction, and the icy "nightmare" Silent Hill, where Harry cannot fight back against the demons that show up to pursue him. The idea was that keeping Harry defenseless would create tension and fear as the player can do nothing but run until safety is found. The idea doesn't work. *At all.* The nightmare scenes aren't scary, they're frustrating, and the demons are so skilled and speedy at ganging together to stop you that the segments turn into little more than obnoxious quick-time events. Make a bit of progress, die, repeat until you know exactly what to do in what precise order so that you can just get the thing over with.

The problem is, this is a Silent Hill game–a legitimate, built-to-be Silent Hill game, unlike SH4: The Room–and it's almost as if it completely forgets that fact. The town of Silent Hill is to the series what the island is to *Lost*: not just a location, but also a character, and a major one at that, one which acts as the catalyst for what its visitors will face both externally and internally. The Silent Hill that Harry is let loose into here isn't a town that has become lost to evil; it's just, well, a town. It's not empty because you've crossed into another world, it's empty because of a snowstorm. There are a shocking number of people ready and waiting to cross paths with you, and at numerous times in the game Harry can use his iPhone-esque mobile to call up and chat with minor characters. Wait, what?



Old-school all the way: snow, not ash.





The buildings and streets aren't decaying and decrepit, they're just unkempt, and exploration through them is shallow at best as snowdrifts keep you from straying far from the path of plot progression. Even the fun of searching for tucked-away goodies has been simplified, as anything that can be interacted with or opened sports a big, hard to miss arrow.

And what lies in wait for you there, hiding in the streets of Silent Hill? Nothing. When you're outside of the nightmare world–which is a majority of the game–there's nothing to scare you, nothing to threaten you, nothing at all that can ever harm you or give you any reason to hesitate before going through that next door. *Nothing*. The few "atmospheric" elements you'll encounter are all completely harmless, so even the screeching of your radio as it suddenly interrupts the silence becomes but a clue that there's something close by to investigate.

Silent Hill isn't Resident Evil; the series has never been only about monsters lurking in the shadows. But it *has* been about putting us humans in those situations that frighten and challenge us physically, mentally, or emotionally. I kept waiting for those elements to finally kick in... and then the end credits rolled. You could do a perfectly wonderful Silent Hill title without ever featuring one monster, but not when the emotional impact of all of its major elements are as weak as they are here.

I don't want "just another Silent Hill" at this point, because there is so much that can be done with the series, so much promise and potential when placed in the hands of one who truly understands the mental and emotional consequences of the city and its power. So, the fact that Shattered Memories was crafted as a means to try to bring excitement and energy back to the series is an attempt that I respect from the bottom of my heart. But when I play it, when I'm told this is what a team of men and women thought should be the direction the series should take, I'm left baffled by how, in my eyes, the entire essence of Silent Hill has either been completely ignored or simply wasn't understood from the beginning (even beyond what I've mentioned here). I almost wasn't sure if I should be the one to review it at first, because for a while I was absolutely certain that something was so wrong with me that I had simply lost the ability to comprehend what I was playing. The story doesn't feel like Silent Hill, the characters don't feel like Silent Hill, the mood, the atmosphere, the exploration, the themes, even Silent Hill itself doesn't feel like Silent Hill.

Choosing to re-image the events of Konami's groundbreaking series instead of simply remaking them I was ready for; completely tossing out most of its heart and soul I was not. play

parting shot

Silent Hill: Shattered Memories is a captivating, engrossing, daring, and mostly enjoyable attempt at survival horror, and on that level, I absolutely think it is worth your time and commitment. As a Silent Hill title, I cannot call it bad–because I cannot, as a reviewer, or as a fan, call it "Silent Hill." Period.

preview **System:** NDS **Developer:** Nintendo **Publisher:** Nintendo **ESRB:** E10+ **Available:** Dec 7



The Legend of Zelda
Spirit Tracks

Link swaps sails for rails—and picks up a sidekick along the way

words Casey Loe

In bringing new playable demos to nearly every trade show in 2009, Nintendo has rarely missed an opportunity to show off The Legend of Zelda: Spirit Tracks. What they haven't been so eager to do is talk about it. Seven months after its debut, nearly every aspect of the game's story and structure remains shrouded in mystery. With only a month to go before its December 7th release, we've finally had a chance to sit down with the game's opening chapter and figure out what the hell is happening in Hyrule.

Spirit Tracks take place in the same world as Phantom Hourglass, but in one of those nebulous Zelda-sequel dimensions, where the events of past games are known history, but no one has noticed that the exact same characters with the exact same names are all inexplicably alive again. Spirit Tracks actually takes the rare step of paying direct tribute to its predecessor; a stained-glass window of Phantom Hourglass Link is the centerpiece of Hyrule's main temple.

Spirit-Tracks Link pays a visit to that very temple on the day he receives his graduation certificate and becomes a full-fledged train engineer. But as Princess Zelda passes him his diploma, she also slips in a note; she has a secret mission that requires the young engineer's talents. How can Link refuse? Without spoiling anything, let's just say that this mission does not go well, and Princess Zelda soon finds herself without a body, as evil forces have taken her corporeal form for the vilest of purposes. (No, not for that, you perv! For E-rated vile purposes.) But Zelda's disembodied nature will come in surprisingly handy during the quest, as it allows her to slip into the soulless Phantoms and take control of their indestructible bodies. In areas where this is possible, players will have the talents of both Link and Phantom Zelda at their disposal, and can tap an on-screen button at any time to refocus the camera on Phantom Zelda and draw movement paths for her. Her abilities to crush foes, cross lava, and shield Link from projectiles will prove vital in the game's many puzzle-filled dungeons.



As in Phantom Hourglass, those dungeons comes in two forms: The floors of the central hub dungeon, known as the Tower of Spirits, and the far flung temples that are connected to the tower by the titular spirit tracks. (Don't worry; everyone at EAD knows how much we hated having to constantly replay the Temple of the Ocean King in Phantom Hourglass, and they got the message. Players will be visiting entirely new sections of the Tower of Spirits on each trip, and will not have to return to the old ones.) In each chunk of the Tower of Spirits, players will discover a spirit map that restores the flow of power through the network of spirit tracks that connect the tower to a series of distant temples. Link can then take his customizable train along those tracks, stopping at newly accessible towns along the way.

If Spirit Tracks sounds a lot like Phantom Hourglass, it's because it has the same basic structure, the same graphics, the same control scheme, and is, of course, by the exact same team. (And like its predecessor, it also features plenty of silly look-what-the-DS-can-do nonsense like forcing players to lift their DS to their lips DS and blow into the microphone every time they use the new Whirlwind Boomerang item. Ugh.) But with its unique train-track world map, its selection of brand-new items and a promising new mechanic that allows players to control two characters at once, it may yet manage to take the franchise into bolder and more interesting directions than its Wind Waker-based predecessor. play

Spirit Tracks may yet manage to take the franchise into bolder and more interesting directions...





I'm going 'round Hyrule in a crazy train!

review **System:** PSP **Developer:** SCE Studio Cambridge / Media Molecule **Publisher:** SCEA **ESRB:** E **Available:** Now

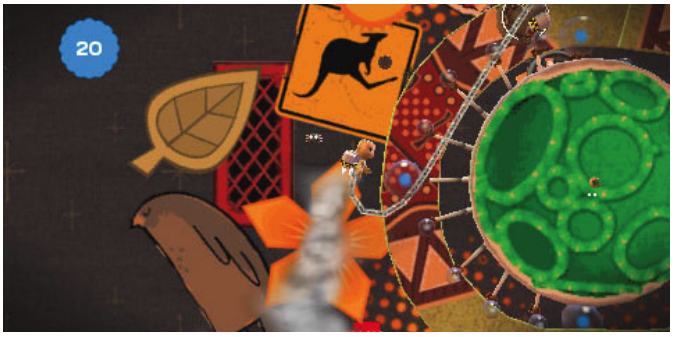
LittleBigPlanet

Little LittleBigPlanet

The moment I spied the original LittleBigPlanet, its concept, presentation, and cute characters screamed "portable game" to me. So, it's little surprise SackBoy and his burlap buddies have managed to find their adorable selves on Sony's hand-held. Despite a significant step down in hardware capability, LBP looses little in the transition. Sure, the visuals, while still some of the best to splash across the portable device's beautiful screen, are not quite as sharp, and some of the content has been cut, but overall, this is a full-featured version that you can take anywhere.

Aside from dropping the co-op play, the series' motto of play, create, share also remains fully intact. Just the story mode alone earns this one a spot in any PSP owners library. Detail-dripping levels brought to life over two planes, and themes from around the globe, complement continuously engaging puzzling and platforming moments. Even if you're not a stickler for sticker-collection completion, you'll find yourself firing this one up after you've completed the campaign.

For those creative types looking to design their own levels, LBP brilliantly delivers that aspect as well. Cooler still, if you're not into the whole game-making thing, you can still log onto PSN and add endless replay value to the title by downloading others' inspired (or not so much) creations. If you couldn't embrace this one's accessibility and charm on the PS3, then there's nothing here to get you on the burlap sack bandwagon. However, if seeing SackBoy decked out like Kratos made your millennium, then this may be your reason to pick up a PSP. **Matt Cabral**







parting shot

LBP makes a near seamless jump to the portable. While some of the content and gameplay is lost to the hardware's limitations, the presentation is as infectiously charming as ever. A robust campaign is rounded out by infinite content through user-created levels. SackBoy's new home is a perfect fit!

review **System:** PSP **Developer:** High Impact Games **Publisher:** SCEA **ESRB:** E10+ **Available:** Now

Jak and Daxter: The Lost Frontier

To the brink... of the PSP!

While Ratchet and Clank are busy stealing a piece of the spotlight for the third time this generation, their old PS2-era pals, Jak and Daxter are yet to bask in the glow of the PS3's power. Thankfully, we have High Impact Games to show the long-eared humanoid and his ottsel sidekick some respect. The developer behind two killer Ratchet and Clank PSP spin-offs, are now casting their portable game-making magic on Sony's other anthropomorphic duo in Jak and Daxter: The Lost Frontier. And while the effort doesn't match the quality of their previous titles, it is a worthwhile romp for those who've been jonesing for Jak since Jak III (sorry, Jak X Combat Racing, you don't count.)

Like the Ratchet PSP games, the visuals here pop off the PSP's crisp screen with retina-pleasing results. Characters animate well, are nicely detailed, and environments impressively devour the hand-held's widescreen. Playing into this sense of scale is the is a focus on air combat; you'll spend a good portion of the adventure in the cockpit of one of many, upgradeable sky-bound crafts. And, when you're up against a screen-swallowing pirate airship, the game shines brighter than a rare chunk of Eco.

The dogfighting and air-based objectives are easily the highlight and, despite the hardware's control limitations, you'll have a blast evading enemies with 180s and barrel rolls. Aside from some niggling camera issues, the ground-based platforming, puzzling, and gunplay—complete with tweakable gear—is similarly satisfying, and much like you remember from the pair's PS2 outings. The Dark Daxter chapter (think Sonic's werewolf-like alter ego from last year's game), however, I found disappointing. They do offer some passable puzzling and battling moments, but I found Daxter's audio to be even more annoying than usual, and the levels to be immersion-breakers that took the pace in an unwelcome direction. Still, if you've been craving the return of Sony's other famed platforming pair, there's lots to love in this on-the-go Eco hunt. **Matt Cabral**

The visuals here pop off the PSP's crisp screen with retina-pleasing results.

parting shot

While lacking the polish and pacing of High Impact Games' Ratchet and Clank titles, The Lost Frontier is an easy recommendation for faithful fans, or even those just craving a solid platforming, puzzling, action-adventure. And the focus on air combat is something I hope to see in the duo's eventual PS3 outing.







Fly the unfriendly skies and pulverize some pirates

feature **System:** NDS **Developer:** Sonic Team **Publisher:** Sega **ESRB:** E10+ **Available:** Now

Phantasy Star Ø

Big adventure in a small package

There was a time when the words "Phantasy Star" conjured up images of expansive RPG experiences where a player would dive solo into an unknown world teeming with strange creatures and fantastic locations. These days, those same words refer to a series that has transformed itself into quests and missions where teamwork with other living, breathing human beings is the key to unlocking the secrets that await.

There are those who wish the franchise would go back to the rustic single-player experience that it used to be. I am not one of those people, for as much as I loved what Phantasy Star was, I love what it has become even more.

And that is at the heart of why this isn't a full-on review of Phantasy Star Ø: with the game not having officially hit here in the States yet as I write this, I can't yet judge what the online experience will be for us once PSØ is in American hands. Sure, there is a single-player story-driven adventure included, one that's quite a bit of fun and which provides an interesting look at how later events in the series come together. But even there, with A.I.-controlled partners tagging along, you're reminded how multiplayer-focused PSØ is–just as it should be. You don't play a game like this just for the single player. Can you? Sure. Should you? Absolutely not.

PSØ is directly based on the gameplay elements and design of Phantasy Star Online–a choice I'm 100% in support of after my disappointment with Phantasy Star Universe–and while the overall experience has seen simplification in the move to the DS, I'm quite honestly shocked at just how much of that old-school PSO feel and attitude was retained. You know those times when a major franchise comes to a portable, and the resulting project feels like an afterthought? Believe me, this is not one of those times. Playing PSØ, I remembered my time back on the Dreamcast, controller in hand, battling the monsters that had overrun Ragol, and boy what a feeling that was. Mixed in with some new updates and ways of thinking, such as a defensive roll, charging techs to use their multiple-target versions, and items not being distributed until all enemies in an area have been cleared (to help avoid treasure hogs), PSØ truly feels like a worthy continuation of the PSO universe.

It's nice to see Sega treating the Phantasy Star series with such love and respect on handhelds. But, come on Sega of America: the time it takes for English versions has gotten pretty ridiculous. Could we please not have to wait a year for Phantasy Star Portable 2? **Eric L. Patterson**

PSØ truly feels like a worthy continuation of the PSO universe.







review **System:** PSP **Developer:** Spike **Publisher:** Atlus **ESRB:** T **Available:** Now

Kenka Bancho: Badass Rumble

Bancho Battle Royale

Yankii (or, depending on how you romanize it, "yankee"): A slang term sometimes used for Americans outside of the States, and people from the Northern U.S. by, well, us Yankees. It has also, however, come to be a nickname for delinquent youth in Japan, specifically those that skip school, get in fights, don't care about social norms, and do such unspeakable things as dying their hair to a color other than black.

What is it about this lifestyle that is so interesting, and at times almost romanticized, as we might do here in the West with the "greaser" subculture from the 1950's? Whatever it is, there's no denying it: the life of a yankii is a whirlwind of adventure and excitement.



At least, that's if Kenka Bancho: Badass Rumble is to be believed; and, really, would video games lie to us? As you head off on a week long class trip to the beautiful Kyoto area of Japan, you find out about a secret tournament going on, where some of the toughest banchos (gang leaders, if you will) are set to do battle, with whomever can prove himself (or herself) the toughest being crowned the most powerful bancho of Japan.

Kenka Bancho, at first, comes across as a so-so action title, but then things kick into full gear and it's a heck of a ride. In order to hunt down and defeat the various banchos, you must scour the various parts of Kyoto, defeating thugs to collect their itineraries in order to find out where gang leaders are going to be hanging out when during the week. Downed rivals drop money, which you can use to buy items or deck yourself out in new clothing. Defeat a bancho, and he'll become an ally. Level yourself up, and you'll unlock a whole roster of new moves, allowing you to customize your fighting style to your liking. If you're lucky, you may even find a moment or two where love can bloom. Just don't forget: ass-kicking before smooching!

In the end, the game almost feels like a 3D River City Ransom, with that same level of gameplay depth, fun of exploration, and goofy charm. Kudos to Atlus for bringing this one our way. **Eric L. Patterson**





Nothing says "badass" like a banana costume.

parting shot

Pick up your PSP, punch some manners into the punks of Japan, and have a blast doing it. I just wish the game's worst enemy–an annoying amount of load times –could be defeated.

review **System:** PSP **Developer:** Team Tachyon **Publisher:** Tecmo **ESRB:** M **Available:** Now







Undead Knights

Flesh for fantasy

Like many non-mainstream games these days, Undead Knights is sorely underrated. In the context of what makes a good mobile game it scores points for an easy-to-pick-up-and-play design that also rewards technique and ultimately the mastery needed to plunge deep into its bloody core, where action gamers will find a surprisingly innovative clutch of tactical play mechanics. I kid you not. In fact, as popular as zombies are I'm surprised no one thought of this before. The gist of Undead Knights is to wound marauding legions and then by plunging your sword, scythe or what have you into them turning them into your own undead puppets. Once converted you can toss them, grab and crush them, use them as shields, or command them as a team to break down barriers or towers, overcome various shielded adversaries or pile onto disgusting bosses who, once in a weakened state, can also be recruited. As the game presses on the scenarios keep pace, as do the tactics—bet you've never made a bridge out of zombies before—but not to worry, UK offers fairly deep customization too...a little black energy goes along way.



M-rated games on handheld are rare, most of which earn their M via common thuggery and the f-bombs that go with it. Undead Knights, however, wears its moniker with pride, sopping with blood and loaded end-to-end with chunky metal riffs along with one of handheld gaming's sexiest female leads who happens to wield the best weapon. Undead Knights could do with a touch more refinement in the jumping and dodging animation and there are a few minor flaws like downed gates that just kinda lay there with no collision, but overall, these are minor at best. A small price to pay for the first fresh idea with rotting corpses in a very long time. **Dave Halverson**



parting shot

Zombies are great soldiers. Their sole motivation is flesh; they're completely fearless, and after a while they rot away (before they get any ideas). I highly recommend checking UK out.

review **System:** PSP **Developer:** Rebellion Developments **Publisher:** LucasArts **ESRB:** T **Available:** Now

Star Wars Battlefront: Elite Squadron

The Force is weak with this one

After all the billions of Star Wars games that've come out over the years, you'd think the time spanning between the prequel trilogy and the Star Wars we all know and love would be mined clean.

Tell that to the boys at Rebellion. They've returned with a sequel to Renegade Squadron, and unlike their first effort, this one's narrative focus spans the length of both film trilogies (and then some). Elite Squadron focuses on two cloned Jedi brothers and the schism the Empire creates between them. It's not as exciting as it sounds, although it's still surprisingly fun to take part in more new scenarios take place during classic series battles like the Death Star, Hoth and Endor, particularly with the more single-player style level design.

But the glaring flaws of Renegade Squadron are still present—camera and movement are both mapped to the PSP's analog nub, making for some really frustrating firefights. With no way to manually adjust your targeting or camera position (and auto-targeting being sluggish) on-foot combat can feel borderline broken at times.



At least the new in-level transitions from infantry to vehicle to space combat are a nice touch, and help break up what would otherwise be monotonous level progression. Production values are great, and actually help make the game more enjoyable. Multiplayer and customization options help as well, though control problems remain. Still, most fans should approach with caution—the potential for fun is there, but you may have to really search your feelings to find it. **Steve Haske**

parting shot

There's still some good in this one, but pulling it from the Dark Side might be more trouble than it's worth.





play is proud to review games on ALIENWARE
powered by NVIDIA

NHN USA fires up the Reactor

A holiday free play buffet

words Mike Griffin

We've been covering more and more free-to-play titles lately. The global PC gaming market is ostensibly flooded with free play hubs, portals and services, and this massive saturation provides a useful contrast to separate the worthy from the inferior pulp, and there's far too much of the latter. One of the best free-to-play services in the West is NHN USA's ijji.com, a portal that caters a significant portion of its library to more hardcore gaming tastes. NHN USA has recently consolidated the launch pad for every game in its library from sub-sites into one easy-to-use launcher app (dubbed the ijji Reactor), a far superior repository. This holiday season the Reactor will be loaded with some rather impressive free play firepower, as it prepares three major titles for commercial service: Alliance of Valiant Arms, Huxley, and Soul of the Ultimate Nation.

preview +feature | Alliance of Valiant Arms | **System:** PC **Developer:** REDDUCK **Publisher:** NHN USA **Multi:** 8-16p Teams **Available:** November

Alliance of Valiant Arms

How to run a successful escort service

It's healthy for gaming editors to be pleasantly surprised now and then. I went into Alliance of Valiant Arms (AVA), a tactical team shooter by South Korean developer REDDUCK, with uncertain expectations. In the realm of free-to-play, the FPS is currently one of the hottest genres, but it's also plagued by plenty of turds. And when most of the full-priced retail shooters are shipping with extensive multiplayer support out of the box, many FPS fans are quick to dismiss free-to-play fair. There's fun to be had in AVA.

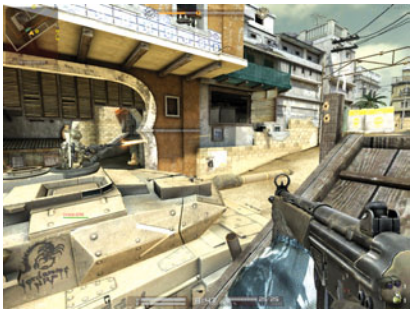
The plot has a powerful far right conservative president, Vladimir Maskov, coming to power in Russia in 2005. He quickly assimilates all Soviet commonwealth nations. Over the next three years, he muscles his way into the Black Sea region, seizing key oil supplies via military coups. Several smaller nations strike deals with Maskov and his now massive coalition, the newly-christened Neo Russian Federation. By early 2008, the NRF has swept through Poland and most of Germany. The European Union, comprised of Germany, France, Great Britain, and most of northern Europe, prepare a major counter-attack. The US and China, bystanders until now, both enter the fray.

The battlefields in AVA take you across the globe to the hotspots of this counter-attack, which manifest in the form of core maps optimized for specific multiplayer modes and objectives. Scorpion is an Escort map set in middle-eastern territory, where teams attempt to guide a tank through a hostile urban maze. Unreal Engine 3 is the technology of choice for AVA, although we're talking about a more judicious use of power to ease system requirements. Nonetheless, the game has a clean appeal and environments are nicely lit, and maps like Scorpion demonstrate welcome touches like billowing tarps and good use of sunny HDR.

These tank escort maps, including Rising Dust, a great nighttime mission, are probably my favorite in AVA. The Leopard 2A6 rumbles along to each checkpoint, the defending team frenetically repairing it as the enemy attacks from every angle. Cleverly arranged side streets and passages let players run parallel to the slowly advancing tank, the fight spilling into East European-themed shops, gas stations, offices and homes, with windows, balconies and stairwells providing nasty murder holes for patient snipers. At critical junctures, the attacking team can access a locker which spawns RPGs, and the rockets begin to fly into that lumbering giant.

Another entertaining map is Cold Case, which champions the Annihilation mode. Cold Case

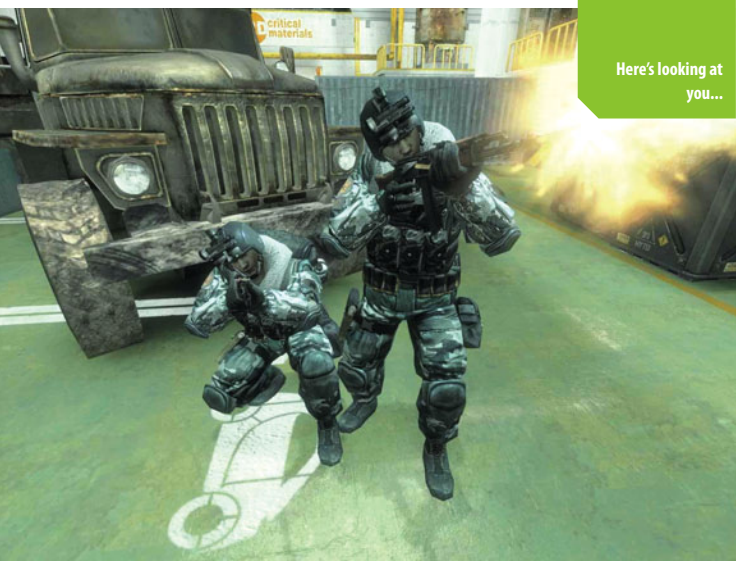






The Leopard 2A6 rumbles along to each checkpoint, the defending team frenetically repairing it as the enemy attacks...





Here's looking at you...



is a classic semi-symmetrical warehouse map in sub-zero Russia, a large rectangular structure with static spawn points at both ends and a main battle zone dotted with tactically essential shipping containers. The Annihilation mode is all out team deathmatch in the raw, with both teams attempting to reach a designated kill plateau in order to secure the win. AVA has a quirky synth-symphonic score dominated by heroic military themes, and the music cues into a mad high-tension tune during the critical phase of any round, like when there's just 20 kills to go in Annihilation.

Unlike the Escort mode, which could potentially camouflage certain combat weaknesses as the tank plays a central role, AVA's first-person shooter fundamentals go under the microscope in a round of Cold Case Annihilation, and you'll find a very capable combat organism. REDDUCK demonstrates a good feel for FPS combat, no doubt assisted by the numerous shooter-making options built into UE 3, and the developer efficiently manages the relative power balance of dozens of customization options.

In the spirit of recent Battlefield and Call of Duty games, and in line with other free-to-play shooters, Alliance of Valiant Arms places a heavy emphasis on persistent soldier upgrades for its Point Man, Rifleman, and Sniper classes. You aren't locked into a class selection; in fact you can respawn as any class in-game by simply pressing F1, F2 or F3. Once you find your preferred role in AVA, however, it's in your best interest to pursue that class to its fullest, earning awards, campaign ribbons, medals and badges as you rank up and promote an increasingly better-equipped persistent soldier.

The Point Man is a frontline killer and the fastest sprinter of the three. He uses short range SMGs like the MP5K PDW, with its devastating spray but slightly unruly recoil, and his advancing skills focus on run speed, improved knife attacks, and advanced maneuvers—like vastly decreased falling damage. The Rifleman is your general purpose mid-range attacker, skilled with classic longer-stock MGs like the M16A and AK-47. The Rifleman is far more accurate than the ninja-like Point Man, but his stable weapons tend to have a slower rate of fire, meaning a little more sustained exposure. Thus his upgradeable skills focus on basic overall defense, helmet defense, improved shot grouping while moving, and enhanced grenade throw range.

As you may have noticed, the Rifleman is built to absorb and deter sniper punishment. That's because AVA's Sniper is incredibly lethal, wielding long range doomsticks like the Russian-made SV98, a military-modified competitive sport rifle, accurate to within a three-inch diameter impact from over three hundred meters away. The Sniper's path through achievements and upgrades will focus on sniper rifle draw and reload speed, shot grouping while scoped, stable firing while crouched and moving, and when your sniper nest is discovered, advanced pistol training gives you a better chance to escape.

Many FPS players are also military equipment buffs, and AVA's well-modeled real world weaponry won't disappoint. Another perk that comes with Unreal Engine 3 is its deep weapon modification system. Guns in AVA come with up to six modify slots: the barrel and muzzle for accuracy, power and spread; the rail mount for dot sights, scopes, etcetera; the trigger for accuracy and fire rate; and the grip can be modified for weapon stability and draw speed. Your soldier's gear is also fully upgradeable, with slots for various body armor, helmets, gloves, shock absorbing boots, masks, goggles (though all soldiers come standard with nightvision specs), and backpacks with extra slots for equipping more grenades, extra primary and secondary ammo mags, or Kevlar reinforcement for additional back protection.

Your performance will feed XP to advance the soldier rank and upgrade system, and each round will earn you a little cash to save up for equipment. Many of the soldier achievements also kick-in some cash once unlocked. To generate additional game funds, you'll also have a number of Challenges to complete. Almost like an extension of the game's light introductory tutorial, some of these Challenges encourage players to tinker with the customization system, others ask you to participate in all the modes and maps, repair or destroy a tank, or collect dog tags from defeated foes. As if all these achievements weren't enough to pursue, AVA includes a comprehensive soldier profile that tracks every type of score (attack, defense, tactical) and every kill and death, for every class, map and mode.

My feeling when it comes to a surprisingly solid free-to-play shooter like AVA is as follows: seriously, what do you have to lose? Yes, the game will offer a means to leapfrog to the equipment checkout via cash shop micro-transactions (this is, after all, a primary revenue stream for the F2P model), but the choice gear is ultimately not a game-breaking advantage. If you want to drop in for a few rounds of tank escort, annihilation, or demolition (an old school bomb arming run), with many more modes and maps on the way, while ranking up a progressive soldier in some pretty good looking FPS combat… well, it's literally priceless. play

Reactor previews continued =>





review | Soul of the Ultimate Nation | **System:** PC **Developer:** S-Studio **Publisher:** NHN USA **Multi:** 8-16p Teams **Available:** Now

+feature

Soul of the Ultimate Nation

The SUN rises in the West

Another Webzen-developed product that's been lingering on the perimeter of Western release for years, Soul of the Ultimate Nation has at last seen the light of day through ijji.com. This heavily instance-based fantasy MMO is a completionist's dream come true, with self-imposed settings and achievements for every crawl through the catacombs or fields of besieged Roshuel.

You can lobby up for mission and hunting maps in SUN's village hubs using an interface that permits hosts to select the map and mode, party size, min and max character levels, and which main story mission and sub-missions your party will take on in the map. Of course if you're just surfing around for a party to join, from level 5 and up you can simply pick a mode (mission/competitive hunting/PvP) and hit the quick join button. While adventuring as a party in mission and hunting zones, every player in the group gets a copy of all items dropped by a monster, and some interesting metrics—like first hit and total critical percentage—determines the competitive XP spread. Webzen sprinkles their dungeons and fields with levers, switches and other clickables to keep you engaged between fights.

You can bring seven players into a typical mission or field group, and up to ten players per party in the big battlezones of areas like Frozen Palace. To add more meaning to the everlasting slaughter, world zones also offer the challenge of Area Conquest. Many objectives are set forth for players: collecting specific items, clearing hidden missions, win streaks in competitive hunting, finding hidden treasure boxes, slaying bosses or high rank players, and other zone-specific achievements. You'll be rewarded at various completion tiers, leading up to the choice goodies for a 100% Area Conquest.

SUN's combat employs fairly standard MMO controls and rhythm, although it has a tighter positional game than most auto-attack MMO combat, with bonus effects during strafing, flanking, and quick back and forth movement. You'll execute plenty of dramatic animation and particle flair for the big knockbacks, stuns, and linked attacks, of which there are many. Warrior classes like the Berserker and Dragonknight can adopt different combat styles (usually based on weapon type), each with unique skills to build up—such as the basic Fighting style, which can provide enhanced defense, knockbacks and stuns, depending how one's skill expertise is focused.

Play any MMO long enough, and—unless you're a total jackass—you'll usually find some friends and party regulars along the journey, which often leads down the path of guild membership. SUN has an extensive guild leveling system, raised through member performance contributions. By Rank 4, guilds can start fighting for ownership of contested castles in siege zones.

SUN transitioned from open beta to commercial service in good form, raising the character level cap from 50 to 70, adding more weapons and armor to enemy drop tables, and implementing a greatly enhanced item socketing system. And just as the temperature begins to drop outside, SUN's Frozen Palace region was officially introduced to North American players alongside a host of Area Conquest objectives. play

...dramatic animation and particle flair for the big knockback, stuns, and linked attacks.







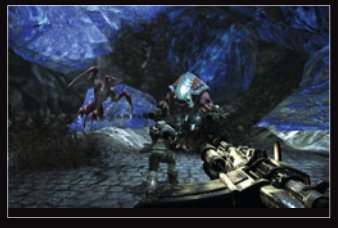
Isn't armor supposed to protect?



Huxley: The Dystopia

There was a time when Huxley was destined for both PC and Xbox 360, with thrilling cross-platform scenario gameplay. Ever since Webzen and NHN struck a big publishing deal in Korea, this vision for Huxley has taken a different course. The console version is still unofficially in production (the Webzen-NHN deal is specific to PC), but it's a fading dream.

In the meantime, the PC version is soon opening its doors to the Western world as a free-to-play proposition on ijji.com, re-dubbed Huxley: The Dystopia. Huxley offers some well-tuned and elegantly designed PvP zones, and in this co-op crazy climate (as Borderlands and Left 4 Dead 2 dominate the charts), Huxley may also carve out a niche as a rewarding co-op shooter with its extensive MMO-style party missions. play





System: PC **Developer:** Zero Point **Publisher:** Runic Games/Perfect World **Available:** Now

Interstellar Marines

For the love of the game





Since our first preview of the sci-fi FPS Interstellar Marines early this summer, the trials and tribulations of independent developer Zero Point Software continue, but so too does development of the game. To refresh your memory, Interstellar Marines is the first of its kind to claim a "AAA Indie" business model. Zero Point is approaching this 4-player co-op campaign trilogy with an uncompromising AAA quality target, and besides a small group of dedicated investors, the developer is relying entirely on direct fan support to fund and form a longtime dream project.

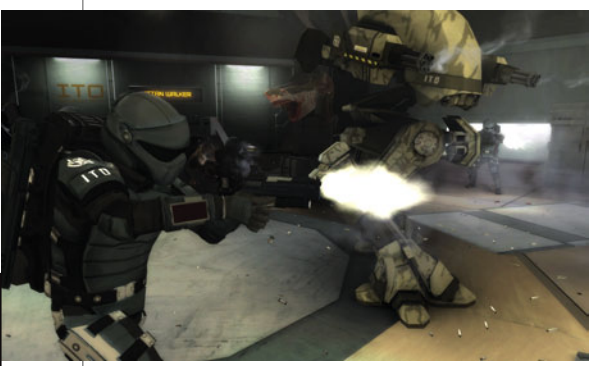
In the months since we broke the first real gameplay details and real-time images of Interstellar Marines, the ZPS team has been busy proving its worth to all early supporters. First, there was the big signing of ex-EA Producer San Shepherd to the developer's board of directors. San's experience launching big games like Burnout Paradise will be a major asset going forward. Next, we had ZPS's confirmation that Unity would be the technology powering Interstellar Marines. Popular and effective this generation for Wii and iPhone development, Unity happily scales in power all the way up to cutting edge Direct X rendering pipelines, capable of tossing around millions of polygons per second on sufficiently beefy hardware. Unity's deep networked multiplayer functionality is also a perfect match for this story-driven co-op campaign, where every player has a role in the story, as opposed to one protagonist and three faceless sidekicks.

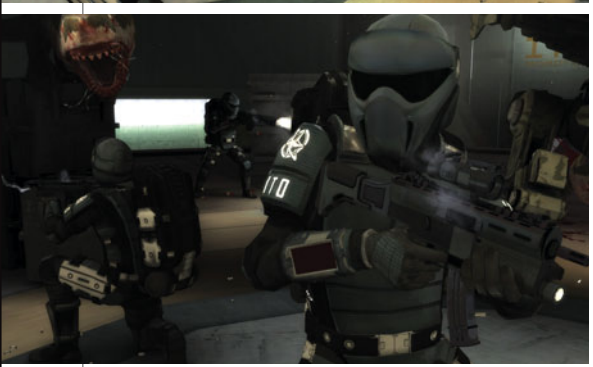
Instead of using static screens and scripted trailers to show-off Unity's potential in IM, Zero Point decided to give its fans a glimpse of the real-time experience. Built to run in Unity's fully 3D-capable web browser plug-in, The Vault drops players into a chamber where various action scenes are frozen in a bullet time-like action pose. The viewer can walk around these intense scenes in a first-person perspective, complete with WASD controls, kind of like Hiro from Heroes using his time freeze to stroll around a roomful of suspended activity. In this case, we get a close-up look at the four-man marine squad taking on one of IM's genetic aberrations, Carcaradon Polemos—the mutant landshark, alongside the Shronbell M7 HASR, a.k.a. the Titan Walker. The area also opens up into a large hangar where you'll find a Megalodon with a fully-modeled interior. This is the huge strategic dropship that players will board to reach missions throughout the co-op campaign, as the Interstellar Marines fulfill missions on behalf of the ITO.

The marines can't do their job without AI liaison and network administrator 'SARA'—and she officially has a voice now. Terri Brosius, famous in the annals of gaming for her outstanding VO performance of Shodan in System Shock 2, is now the sexy and stern voice of SARA, providing players with all the mission-critical data and direction they need. We have a very good feeling about Interstellar Marines' potentially epic co-op gameplay and strong presentation, and when Zero Point Software starts to bring in people like Terri, it gives the whole project a healthy boost to credibility. Independently developed or not, Interstellar Marines won't deviate from its core designs or AAA goals.

Keep an eye on the interstellarmarines.com website throughout December as the next real-time sample, codenamed Bull's Eye, is scheduled to go live. This will be a milestone release for IM—the first slice of playable gameplay. Set in a sophisticated training facility that really pushes the Unity engine, players will get to test the capabilities of Interstellar Marines' weapon shooting mechanics and action controls while absorbing new, tempting bits of plotline. play

Zero Point is relying entirely on direct fan support...







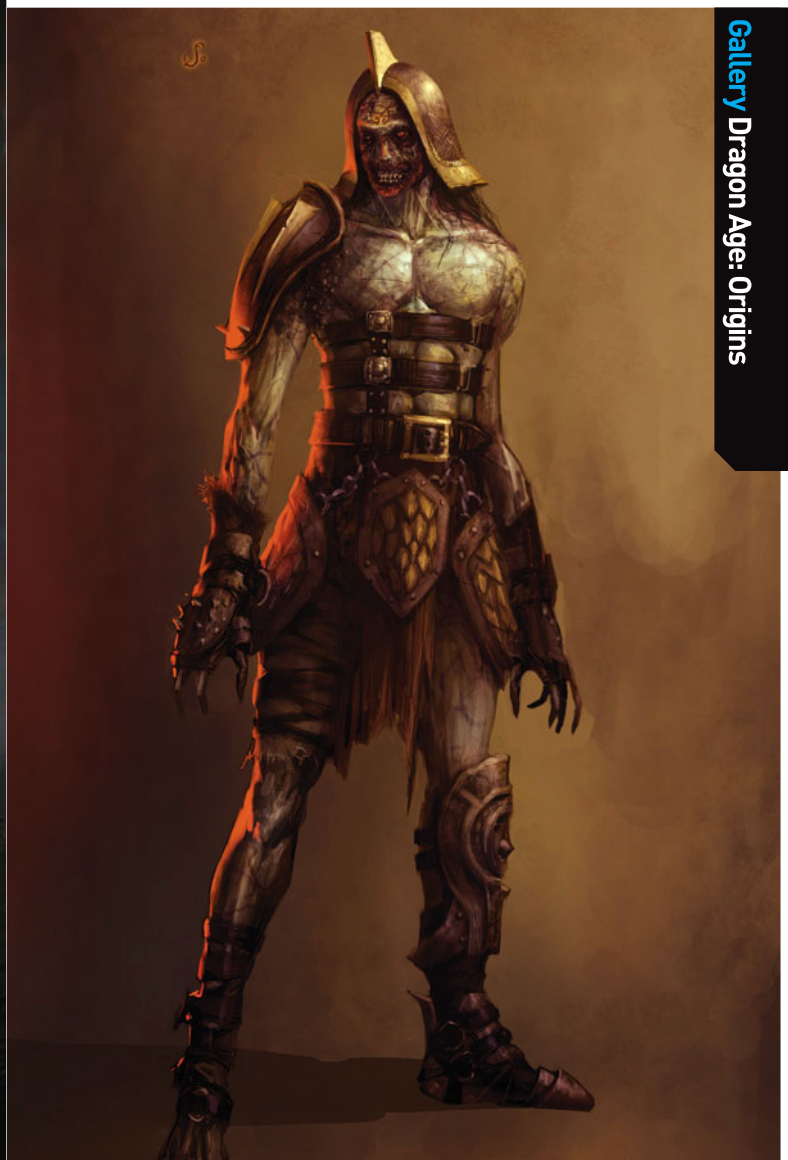
No man left behind: Co-op gameplay is the supreme focus of this campaign.











Gallery Dragon Age: Origins

Attack of the DotA clones

Hot on the heels of Riot Games' League of Legends, S2 Games, developer of the cult-hit strategic shooters in the Savage series, will soon be releasing its own DotA update, called Heroes of Newerth. DotA is *Defense of the Ancients*, a hugely popular fan-created Warcraft III mod. The DotA formula is a streamlined hybrid RTS design, a fast-paced competitive game where teams of unique player-controlled Hero characters make strategic use of "lanes" (environment pathways), attack towers, and a near endless supply of AI fodder minions in an attempt to kill each other's Ancient. S2's founders are huge fans of this mod. Heroes of Newerth, based on lore and heroes from the Savage universe, and built from the ground up inside a modern proprietary engine, represents the developer's dream homage—now polished to a professional standard.



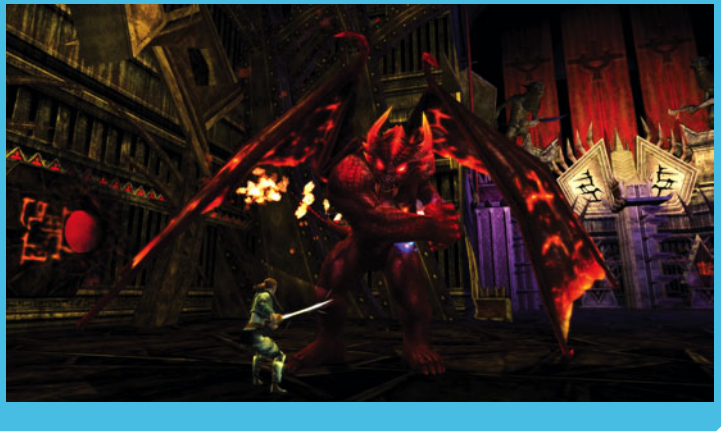


Unlimited pay off

Turbine's new free-to-play strategy with Dungeons & Dragons Online: Eberron Unlimited has proven to be a massive success. The venerable MMORPG developer, recently celebrating the 10th anniversary of Asheron's Call and planning the epic conclusion to Volume II of Lord of the Rings Online, has been completely overwhelmed by the influx of new DDO Unlimited players. Having only recently patched the game's first major update since it turned free-to-play, and with the arrival of Epic dungeon difficulty and over 100 new items in the DDO Store, November also witnessed the launch of a new extreme high-capacity server world, dubbed Orien. The mega server is only available to dungeon crawlers starting new DDO characters, and thousands of players have already flocked to Orien's nascent society.

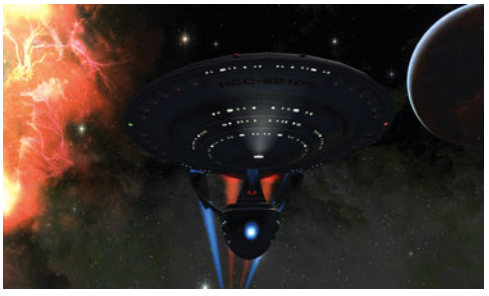






Boldly go where no beta has gone before

A massively multiplayer game truly graduates from pomp and promise to hard, inevitable fact when it transitions into closed beta, a milestone recently attained by Star Trek Online. Not that there's ever been a fear of STO slipping since the project was taken on by Cryptic Studios and Atari (with ample additional support from the Star Trek franchise holders), but now that the game is welcoming select community members into the CB phase, it's like a photon torpedo rocketing unerringly towards release. Cryptic will host **play** for an exclusive studio preview session right after this issue closes, in advance of our whopping Star Trek Online feature next month. We'll join Starfleet and fight alongside the Federation in the role of ship captain, or learn the ways of a warrior in the Klingon Empire, brought to life inside one of Cryptic's typically excellent character creators. STO will offer a huge, ever expanding universe to travel during your captain career with customizable, battle-ready ships, and countless planets to explore on foot as you beam down with personally trained away teams.







Released by: FUNimation **Rating:** TV-14 **Running Time:** 315 Minutes **Volume:** 1 **Available:** Now



Dragonaut: The Resonance

Naut Just a Pretty Face

words Bill Gray

I had a difficult time watching *Dragonaut: The Resonance*, FUNi's latest GONZO release. Not because the animation was choppy or the subject matter uncomfortable. No, the primary reason I had a tough time following the story was because every third character in the show possessed enormous breasts that hovered on the verge of pulling a Janet Jackson with every speech, fight, or slight movement. How are you supposed to take, say, the show's lead scientist seriously when she could spill out of her top at any moment?

Behind all of the boobies, however, lies a solid show based on tried and true anime concepts—a mysterious hero unaware of his true potential, an even more mysterious girl that may or may not be on his side, and of course, lots of action-packed battles between mecha-like dragons, all wrapped up neatly in a conspiracy that threatens Earth's existence.

Let's take them from the top, shall we? The hero in question is Jin Kamishima, an 18-year old who lost his entire family in a Challenger-esque space shuttle explosion—only if the Challenger had collided with dragons from space instead of suffering from a leaky O-ring. Jin drifts through life for two years, until a mysterious girl named Toa saves him from a rampaging monster. Jin's specialty seems to be waking up in strange places—after being rescued by Toa, he comes to in an ISDA (Intersolar System Development Agency) room, where he meets his childhood friend, Kazuki and learns part of the truth about the accident that killed his whole family, and about the dragons in general. Turning down an offer to work for the ISDA, Jin meets up again with Toa, only to get chased again, this time by the ISDA—guess they really, really wanted him to work for them.

Things just get more confusing for Jin from there, what with a planet that supplanted Pluto actually being an alien life form, various factions inside and outside of the ISDA competing against each other, and the constant threat posed by extraterrestrial dragons. Each dragon has a human, "communicator" form, and their "actualized" dragon forms. Weirdly enough, in their actualized form, the dragon's human partner can ride inside the dragon in many cases. The actualized form resembles a cross between an actual "swords and sorcery" dragon and a sophisticated mecha, and are usually animated using highly detailed CGI.

Indeed, the animation and character design are two of the strengths of the show, along with its breakneck plot. These factors almost compensate for the show's shortcomings, chief among them the clichéd story and sometimes cheesy fights between the dragons themselves. There's nothing terribly profound about Dragonaut, nothing that's going to keep you up at night or gasp in wonder. No, Dragonaut knows its target audience—male teenage otaku—and delivers a show that they won't be able to keep their eyes off of, primarily for the reasons I mentioned in the first paragraph. play

parting shot

A twisting but solid show that's a pastiche of familiar anime tropes, especially the Eva-like mecha dragons.

Released by: FUNimation **Running Time:** 315 min **Volume:** 2 **Available:** Now

Big Windup

Throwing Strikes



Aaargh, *Big Windup*, you sucked me in again. Perhaps it's just me, but something about this series hooks me every time. Maybe it's the slow build of tension as the Nishiura baseball team grinds away the innings against one of the best baseball teams in the annual summer tournament. Maybe it's the fun of watching main character Mihashi slowly, slowly, realize his own potential. Or maybe I just really like baseball…nah, it's gotta be one of the first two.

Having completed a grueling practice schedule (from 4 a.m. to 9 a.m. every day!), the all-freshman Nishiura baseball team has the misfortune of drawing Tousei, one of the tournament's powerhouse teams and last year's winner. Undaunted, the boys put their training and dedication to good use, riding the stellar (if shaky) arm of their pitcher, Mihashi. With the support of his catcher/attitude coach/friend Abe, they give Tousei all it can handle in the first round. You'll have to watch the show to find out who wins…

Big Windup illustrates the absolute fanaticism that many Japanese have toward baseball, especially high school baseball. The show focuses on each battle between pitcher and hitter, and builds the tension throughout the game as strategies shift and players react and counter-react to each other. It may sound odd, but even though the series takes roughly 12 episodes to cover Nishiura's first game, it still feels short. *Big Windup* is proof that quirky, offbeat, or even seemingly boring subjects can be utterly captivating if handled in the right way. Now what am I gonna do while I wait for the next season to be released? Watch actual baseball? Perish the thought! **Bill Gray**

parting shot

One of the most addictive anime I've watched in years. Big Windup captures the spirit and high tension of amateur sports better than any documentary or movie I've seen.



Released by: FUNimation **Rating:** TV MA **Running Time:** 288 minutes **Volume:** 2 **Available:** Now

Blassreiter

The complete series part 1

Das is good!



words Dave Halverson

As *Blassreiter* gets underway, Gerd Frentzen is doing what he does best—riding his ultra-futuristic GP racer to victory as the adoring crowd cheers him on. But trouble is afoot as the on-site EMTs discover a beautiful, naked, and unfortunately dead young woman lying in the back of their ambulance. As they turn to call it in to dispatch she suddenly jumps up and eats their brains! ...Actually, no, she doesn't, although nine times out of ten that's the next move. As they turn to call it in to dispatch she merges a tray of scalpels into her hand, turns into a creepy cyborg, then jumps up and aerates one guy (projectile blood splatter generously included) then takes his gun and pumps two into the chest of his partner. Meanwhile back on the track the competition is really heating up, but what's this? Is that thing driving onto the track…backwards? No, it's driving into the pits backwards right into what looks like a… Ka-Boom! fuel tank. Emerging unscathed still with the gun, she, it, whatever begins shooting at the racers (!) when suddenly another one shows up, on a bike no less, and slices her in two with a laser whip, blowing her sky high in the process. Way to go good weird cyborg thing! But wait, its torso is crawling from the wreckage, and it's, is that…yes, it's morphed itself onto one of the bikes and it's racing down the track Road Rash-style, slashing everyone in its path, and here comes Gerd! The good one takes chase and quickly catches up but Gerd's gone bye-bye and isn't backing off the throttle. Flying off his bike at top speed, time seems to stand still as we brace ourselves for what's sure to be a pulverizing impact, when suddenly…he wakes up? No! It was a dream!? But that was so cool! Why can't that be the show? But wait…he's in the hospital, and his buddy is trying to convince him to go on living even though he's lost the use of his legs. Ha! But still, that had to be a dream. I mean, he's not all psycho or anything…

Two minutes later the cat comes flying out of the bag as the members of XAT convene to discuss Gerd's state of mind as he goes home from the hospital a broken man; XAT being the organization tasked with bringing down the "Demoniacs." Now this could get interesting.

Talk about a pandemic! How do you kill a condition that manifests itself post mortem, rendering its victims insane, bloodthirsty, and able to meld and interact with ANY technology? Since they can't seem to beat 'em, maybe they should join 'em. But what about the whole being dead part? Tune into *Blassreiter* and find out! play

Since they can't seem to beat 'em, maybe they should join 'em.



parting shot

Blassreiter is a trip... Everyone wants to kill the good guy; the leader of XAT seems clueless, some lady is walking around with the virus in a pill, and the same poor kid keeps getting beat up. Can't wait to see what's next!



Happy Holidays from all the Otaku at RightStuf.com

ONE-SHOT FITS ALL

Start small, go big

words Dave Halverson

Anatomy of a One-Shot: A one-shot is a self-contained story that exists within a certain universe but isn't necessarily part of a particular story arc. Think of it as stuff your favorite characters do when there are no writers around, or on their days off.

One-shots are also a great way to determine whether or not a particular series appeals to you enough to invest in the back catalog and/or add to your rotation, provided you have a rotation. If not, I highly suggest taking Dark Horse up on this amazing offer.

What's cool about *One-Shot Wonders* is that they've all been handpicked by Dark Horse's own Scott Allie, a guy who knows a thing or two about comics—namely which series are compelling enough to engage and possibly hook a new reader or augment a particular series enough to make it a must have for existing fans.



Conan the Cimmerian: The Weight of the Crown

Take *Hellboy: The Bride of Hell* for instance. As an avid fan and regular Hellboy reader, I'd pick up *Bride* for the Richard Corben art alone and expect to pay about $7.50. So at $3.50—roughly the price of a comic—it's pretty much a no brainer. In fact at $3.50 I highly recommend checking it out for yourself. If you've never read a Hellboy comic but like the Guillermo Del Torro films (and who doesn't?) 32 pages should give you a good idea of what inspired him to make them. The Eisner Award winning Sugarshock (Joss Whedon, Fabio Moon) originally presented in the first online issues of *MySpace Dark Horse Presents*, is another exciting piece of nine. In fact, I'm pretty sure it's never been available in stand-alone print. It's also the most animated and unrestrained you'll ever find Mr. Whedon… Even so, the Willow Season Eight One-Shot is still my personal favorite among the nine; especially if you're not familiar with Joss Whedon's *Season Eight Willow*. Season Eight on HBO would single-handedly fix the economy and bring about world peace. A drop dead gorgeous Joe Chen cover and Karl Moline pencils for $3.50? Buy a few and tell a friend…mark it up a few bucks though. No, I'm kidding.

Think of a one-shot as stuff your favorite characters do when there are no writers around, or on their days off.

There are a total of nine one-shots in all, available through December. For more details or to order or pre-book visit www.darkhorse.com and search "one shot wonders." play

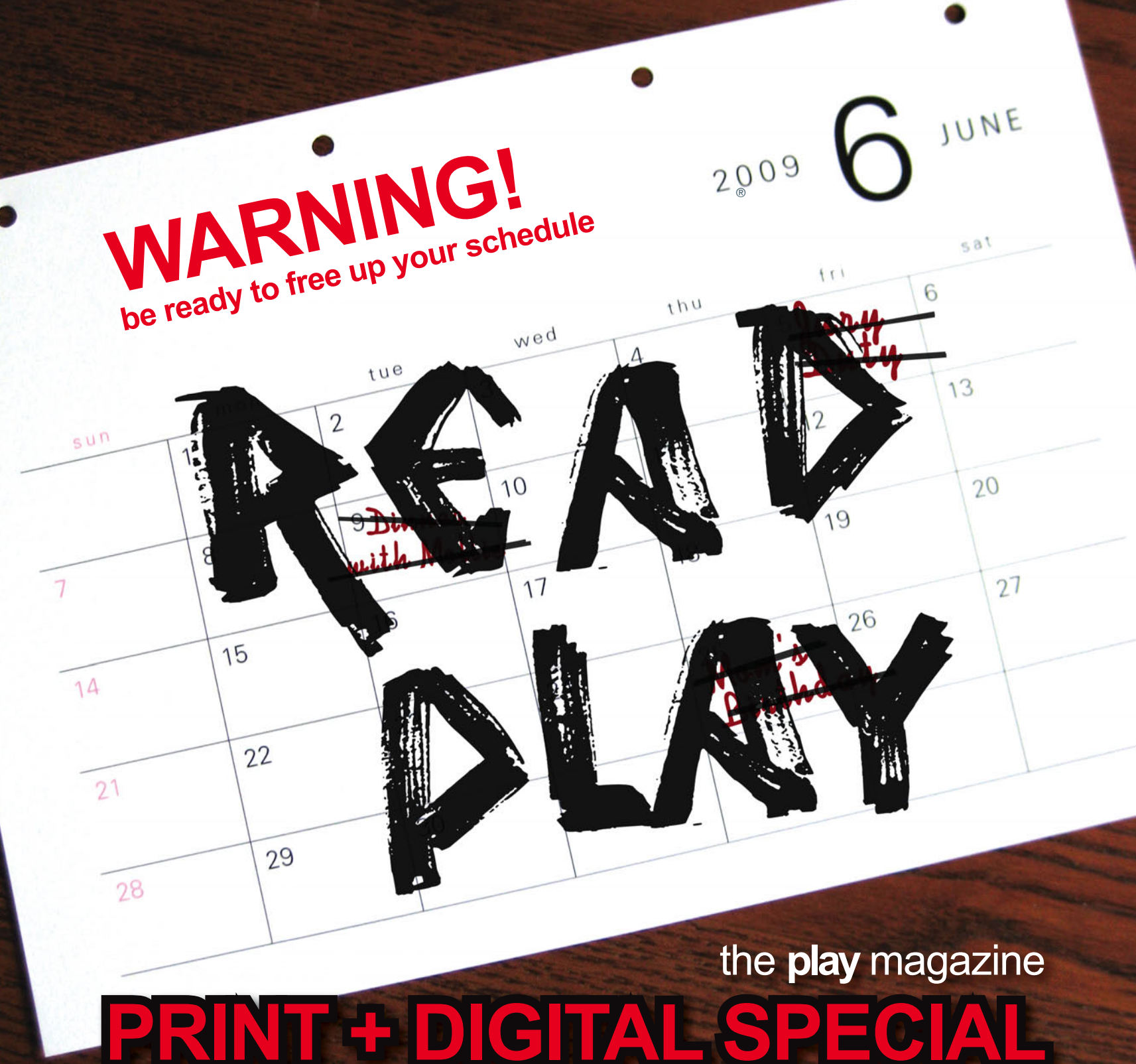
The 9 are: Dr. Horrible (3 books available); Star Wars: Purge—Seconds to Die; Star Wars Invasion #0; Abe Sapien; Sugarshock; Buffy the Vampire Slayer Season Eight: Willow (2 books available); Hellboy: The Bride of Hell; Conan the Cimmerian: The Weight of the Crown.



Hellboy: The Bride of Hell



Buffy the Vampire Slayer Season Eight: Willow



the **play** magazine

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UP

The Best Pixar Film Of The

words Heather Anne Campbell







Up is the story of an old man and his wife. He grows up with her, marries her, and builds a house with her. Their shared outlook on adventure and life cements them to each other's side. And when she passes away, he's left behind, waiting to die; regretful of the things he didn't finish. Eventually, *Up* will be your story.

As Carl Fredricksen nears death, the world changes around him. His charming neighborhood is overrun with coffee shops and urban development. Though he's received offers for his property, he refuses to part with the house that he shared with his wife, Ellie. Only when he is pressured by the courts is he forced to relinquish his last and only place in the world.

And that's the first fifteen minutes.

Faced with the threat of retirement housing, Carl Fredricksen does the unthinkable: He tethers his house to thousands of balloons, and takes it aloft. He is accompanied by Russell, a Wilderness Explorer (think Boy Scout) who by way of coincidence happens to be on his porch during the launch. Russell is in need of a father figure, Carl is in need of connection. Together, the two travel towards Paradise Falls, so that Carl can fulfill a promise he made to Ellie so many years ago.

What follows is cartoonish adventure. The potent beginnings of the story are left behind for giant, colorful birds, talking rottweilers, a blimp-flying arch villain, and bulldogs that pilot biplanes. There are thematic reasons for each, sure, but it's sometimes hard to see past all the set-pieces to the soul underneath. By the time we get to the end of *Up*, we have journeyed with Carl to both the place where he thought he belonged, and the place that he's meant to be; it's a shame that we have to make so many silly stops along the way, that we need chase-sequences and poop jokes. *Up* begins as something truly powerful, and floats at the edge of being a quiet, surreal film, before succumbing to what marketing and screenplay guides tell us are the *things a movie needs.*

Still, this is the best Pixar film ever made. And perhaps one of the best children's movies, too. It recalls Miyazaki, European comics, and pulp novels. If I were a kid, I would *need* this movie, more than anything. As an adult, I'm jealous that the film was made for children; I want to hold on to the story that *Up* began as, before it becomes a movie made for kids.

The four-disc Blu-Ray edition is just extraordinary. Two discs are dedicated to the movie itself (the feature is on both DVD and BRD), there's a Disney digital copy, and a huge set of special features and games on the fourth and final BRD. You can watch the film with the directors guiding you through it (Cinexplore mode), catch additional (and original) Pixar shorts, there's a half hour about the Pixar team traveling to South America, and a whole set of development documentaries that total about forty-five minutes. Additionally, there's a geography game hosted by Russell, and at least one hidden feature as well. The disc is unbelievably sharp, as all Pixar transfers tend to be. The textures are tangible, the colors as crisp and bright as your screen allows.

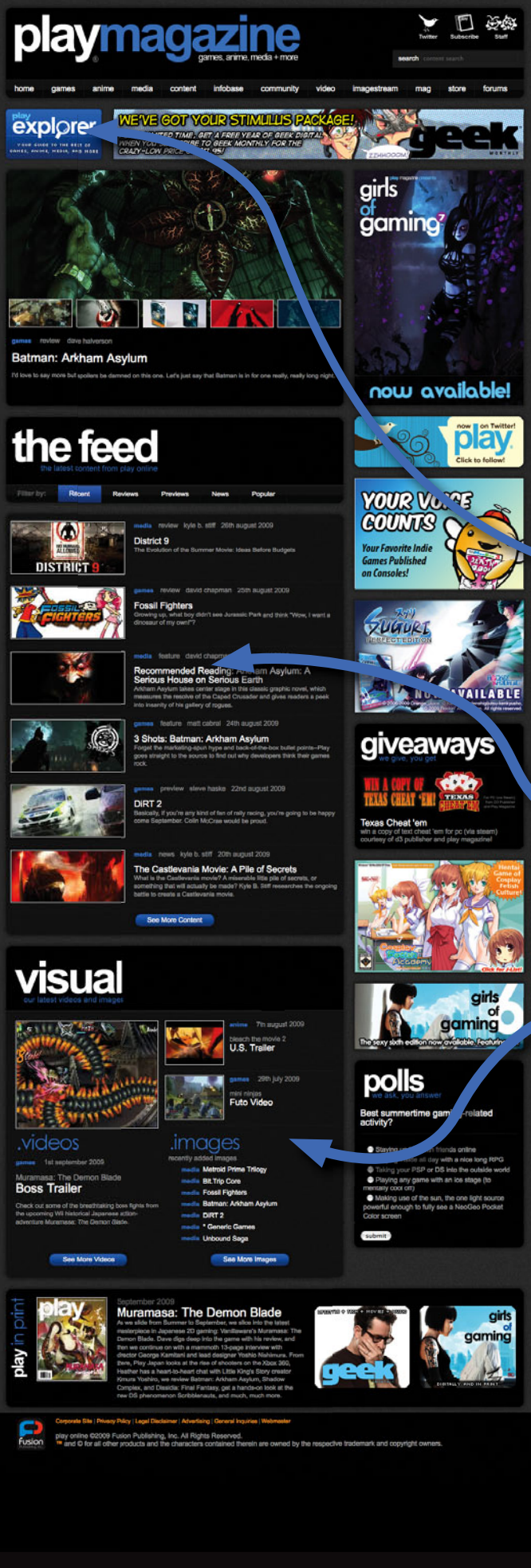
If you like Pixar, *Up* is their best. At the center of all the action is a real, human pain. And it's that story—Carl's story, Carl's regret—that really keeps the film afloat. play



Still, this is the best Pixar film ever made. And perhaps one of the best children's movies, too.

parting shot

Up is wonderful, sad, and hopeful. The Blu-Ray collection is a must-have. With a film like this behind them, we can imagine a future where Pixar makes a movie just for us ... even though it sometimes feels like they already have.



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Our biggest and best web project yet: the all-new **play** online, your complete source for games, anime, media, and more on the internet. We've worked hard to bring you an amazing website, one packed not only with the thought-provoking and inciteful written content you've come to expect from **play** magazine, but also a whole list of exciting new features.

Here's a small sample of what you'll find on the new **play** online:



explorer

Find your way in a sea of confusion with the **play** online explorer, our revolutionary new section that guides you to only the best of what's out there. You don't have the chance to check out everything there is to see what's worth your time and what isn't; let the experts at **play** be your guides to the best of the best.



Smart Searching

We've rebuilt our site engine from the ground up, giving you–the visitor–more power than you can possibly imagine when it comes to searching for and finding the exact reviews, news, game releases, or whatever else you crave.



Visual Delights

At play, we've always considered the visual side of what we do just as important as our writing. For the new play online, you'll not only find exclusive videos and trailers, but also the Imagestream, the only true search engine for screenshots, production art, and more.

the feed

A sampling of the exclusive content recently featured on **play** online

The Castlevania Movie: A Pile of Secrets

What is the Castlevania movie? A miserable little pile of secrets, or something that will actually be made? Kyle B. Stiff researches the ongoing battle to create a Castlevania movie. (search: "castlevania movie")

Recommended Reading

David Chapman brings you his weekly report on the best titles hitting your local comic shop. (search: "recommended reading")

3 Shots: Batman: Arkham Asylum

Forget the marketing-spun hype and back-of-the-box bullet points--Play goes straight to the source to find out why developers think their games rock. (search: "3 shots")

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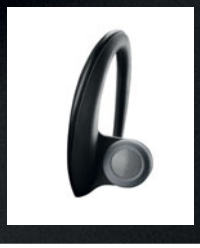
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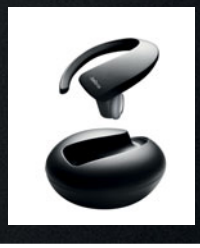
Jabra STONE

Jabra $129.99 www.jabra.com

Could there possibly exist a more elegant and sexy Bluetooth headset than the Jabra STONE? Not on this planet, buddy. The Jabra STONE looks as good as it sounds and won't make you look like a complete toolbox in the process. Eliminating the need for a boom mic, the STONE fits snugly around your right ear (sorry, lefties this headset doesn't swing both ways) and is designed to cancel out any outside noise while maintaining crystal clear reception between parties using Jabra's Noise Blackout™ Extreme technology. A touch sensitive volume pad coupled with the Jabra StatusDisplayTM makes checking battery life and Bluetooth connectivity a snap and the STONE's sleek design makes slipping it in and out of your pocket/purse a breeze. The form-fitting dock not only serves as delicious eye candy when the headset is docked, but also serves as an on-the-go charger that will hold up to 6 hours of additional charge time, for a total of 8 hours of talk time and up to 12 days of standby time. This STONE is definitely one you aren't going to want to pass up.



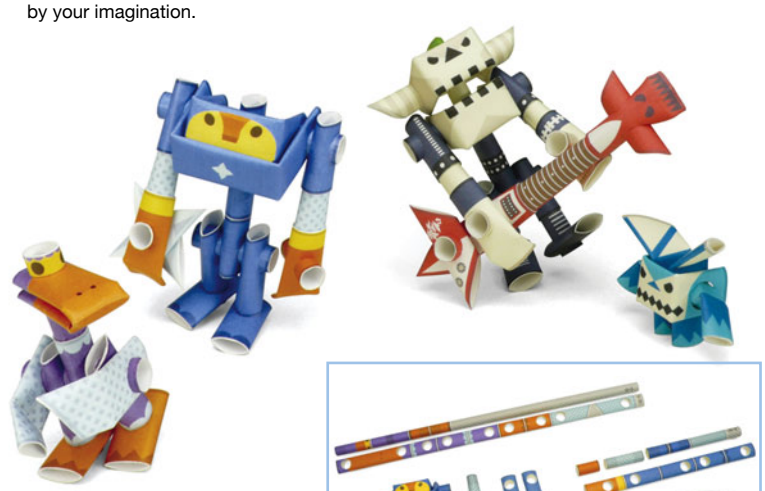




Piperoid

Magnote Corporation Starting at $12.00 www.magnote.com

The Piperoid might just be the coolest thing to come along since the pet rock, but with a truck load more personality (as if that was hard to accomplish going up against a bunch of rocks). The perfect stocking stuffers, Piperoids are pint-sized paper craft robots you construct using only a pair of scissors and the included paper pipes… hence the term 'Piperoid.' In a little under 30 minutes you can cut and fold yourself a new paper craft buddy. And with a wide array of characters to choose from-all with interchangeable parts-the possibility to create your own unique Piperoid is limited only by your imagination.





Good old-fashioned thrills

V-Screen

RealView Innovations, $39.99

Located in Ireland, technology development company RealView has a high-end track record, working on cool projects like medical imaging, military optics and even astronomy. Their latest efforts went into creating the V-Screen, a—in simplest terms—PSP magnifying glass. What makes the device especially notable is its ability to bring out the depth of field in the game you're playing, most directly broadening the sense of space as much as merely amplifying the image. The unit snaps onto the PSP and flips up for comfortable play, allowing you to double it as a storage device. Available for $39.99 this Christmas season, the V-Screen works with every PSP unit outside of PSPGo.





Hello Kitty x MIMOBOT

Mimoco Starting at $24.99
www.mimoco.com

These Hello Kitty USB flash drives are so cute that I have been intermittently spewing rainbows ever since I first laid eyes on them back in August. As part of Hello Kitty's 35th Anniversary celebration, Sanrio has partnered with Mimoco, creator of the MIMOBOT® line of contemporary character-based USB flash drives to transform the cute bunch of critters into MIMOBOT designer flash drives. Ranging 2GB to 16GB capacities, these, like most MIMOBOT flash drives, are sure to become a hot commodity and are almost guaranteed to sell out. Oh no, the sheer cuteness…I think I am going to be sick again, excuse me.

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Gallery Assassin's Creed 2



BACK OF THE BOOK

12_09 HEATHER CAMPBELL
EXECUTIVE EDITOR

Collecting Pictures, Receiving Love

I have been playing Afrika on the PS3 lately, originally for a review for this magazine. When the review was cut, I continued to play it because Afrika is one weird game. Developed by Rhino Studios, Afrika is a safari simulator, or a photography simulator, or a slow jeep simulator, or something. You choose between two photojournalists, arrive at a two-tent base camp, receive virtual email assignments, and set off across the plains to take simulated pictures of simulated animals.

After a long installation, I chose, as my protagonist, the Frenchman, but soon became concerned for his health when he refused to remove his winter beanie during the middle of the African summer. Perhaps I would have been less worried about the American Zoologist, who doesn't bring her mittens to the savannah.

Afrika has the strange, urban-fashion-inspired, psuedo-realistic style of Playstation Home, and the main characters walk in the stiff, "photogenic" way that everyone in Sony's world seems to enjoy. Turning the camera causes the character to turn his head, and eventually shift his feet, which implies that we are controlling not the camera, but rather his point of view. The photo camera is the camera, says Rhino Studios. The screen, by contrast, is what appears in the French man's very warm mind. His very stiff, upright mind.

The animals, too, are stiff, and appear their most life-like when viewed in low-resolution simulated photos. By taking a picture of the creatures, you freeze them in space and time. The stiffer you make these animals, the more realistic they look. Everything in Afrika looks best when it is stopped. Which, perhaps, is why the game moves so slowly. Maybe that's why it was released so slowly.

The game was announced years ago, and for a long time it looked like Sony wasn't going to bring Afrika to the U.S. But Natsume picked up the license, and here it is. Perhaps it is the long delay that makes the game seem so unfinished, so young. This is a game that was made for early life-cycle PS3s, not the PS3 Slims that sit under so many flatscreen sets these days. Early trailers made it seem like Afrika would be indistinguishable from real safari footage. The game we've been given is nothing of the sort. I've seen animals move more realistically in Final Fantasy games.

Who is Afrika designed for? Who is its intended audience? It's a fifty dollar novelty, and it's not even that novel for that long. It's as if someone said, "Let's take one of the few remaining wild places on earth, and see what it would look like if it were made of plastic." National Geographic must have thought this was a good idea, too, for their name and brand are represented throughout the game. At one point, you're working for them, taking simulated pictures for simulated National Geographic. I guess the idea of a photo-realistic safari game was attractive to me—I was, after all, the first person to shoot my hand up at the opportunity to review this game.

But was there some market research which informed Rhino that the people most likely to purchase a safari simulator also expected their games to have disturbingly stiff heroes? Or that we needed a base-camp hub world to justify our photography? I wanted a game where I just cruised around Africa looking for animals. When I found the animals, I could take pictures of them. It would be like Pokemon. The goal of the Pokemon is not to collect Pokemon. It is to collect pictures of Pokemon. As a bonus, you also get sheets of numbers with your Pokemon pictures, which interact with other creatures' sheets of numbers. Mash your numbers up against another creatures numbers enough times and you change the picture of your Pokemon. You gotta catch them all ... err, photograph them all.

A few members of the press have likened Afrika to Pokemon Snap. It *is* like Pokemon Snap, but then Pokemon Snap is like Pokemon. Nintendo just replaced "having" with "photographing." Otherwise, everything is the same. Afrika is like Pokemon Snap is like Pokemon. In Pokemon, you run around and collect pictures of Pokemon with numbers attached. In Pokemon Snap, you're stuck on a pre-determined path, collecting pictures of Pokemon mostly *without* numbers. In Afrika, you're driving around in a jeep, collecting pictures of animals, and then you return to base camp to get your numbers.

Why couldn't it just be about taking the pictures? That's the best part of these games: The collection, not the garbage that gets in the way of it. Afrika should have been a game with nearly limitless animals. They interact with each other, hunt each other, ignore each other.

Perhaps it could have been online, and once a week, you'd receive a scientific newsletter telling you that there was some new animal out there that had been discovered. You wouldn't know exactly where it was, but you knew you should take a picture of it. Perhaps this database of animals could be updated in real-time with real-world discoveries. The new animal's most basic attributes would be uploaded into the game. And I would know: Somewhere, there is a new bird. And since this is a photography game, I would like to take its picture.

I typically refuse to play games that simulate something I can do in real life. I don't like sports games because I'd rather play actual sports. Sure, I can't be a professional basketball player, but I can go down to the court and play basketball to the best of my ability. I can play football. I can ski.

But I can't throw fireballs or fight demons or double jump. I wish, more than anything, that I could double jump, or jump like the ninjas in Naruto. I would rather be able to jump very, very high, than to be able to fly. Struggling against gravity is more interesting than being free from it. That's why it's more powerful to love someone than to be unconditionally loved.

I guess what I'm getting at here is that perhaps Afrika and I were never meant to be together from the beginning. I'm not attracted to the idea of a game where I can simulate taking pictures of simulated animals. I'm attracted to the idea of an actual safari. I can go out into the world and take pictures. I have a camera, and there is a world out there. If I wanted, I could save my money and go to Africa and take pictures of animals on a safari. What is the point of this game? Why do we need a game where we pretend to take pictures, as opposed to actually taking pictures? The animals in Afrika are scheduled to be in certain locations at certain times. Do you know where else I can find animals in certain places at certain times? Animal Planet. For fifty bucks, I'd be better off buying a disposable camera and taking actual pictures of my actual television. play

I would rather be able to jump very, very high, than to be able to fly.


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System: Xbox 360, PlayStation 3 **Developer:** Vigil Games **Publisher:** THQ **Available:** Jan 5





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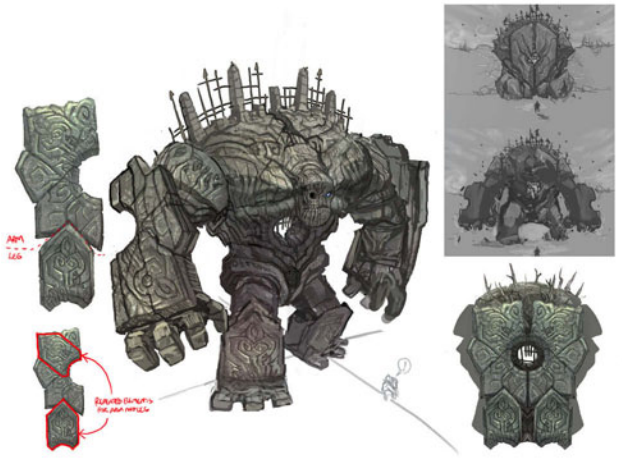












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VIGIL GAMES

System: Xbox 360, PlayStation 3 **Developer:** Vigil Games **Publisher:** THQ **Available:** Jan 5






You know me. But I don't know you. And I don't like strangers.
Especially the uninvited kind.


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System: Xbox 360, PlayStation 3 **Developer:** Vigil Games **Publisher:** THQ **Available:** Jan 5









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